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by Tonto Green

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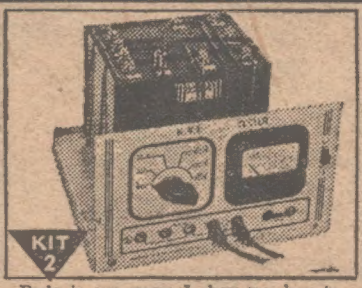

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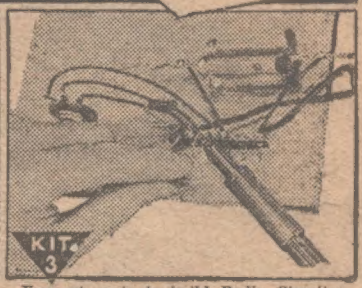

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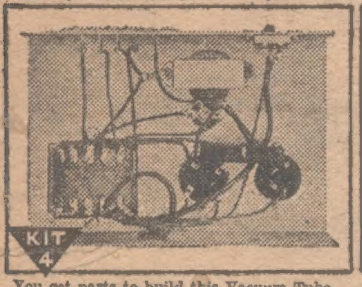

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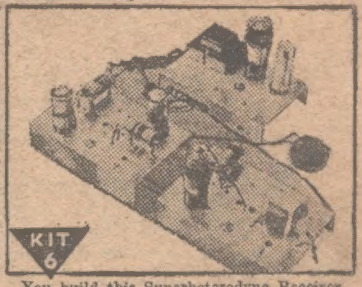

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SPEED WESTERN STORIES

December, 1946 Vol. 6, No. 6

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Not the Last Roundup

By WILL NICHOLS

THE ROUNDUP originated in northwest Texas, where the open spaces were ideally suited for working large herds. Its purpose was to sort out the various brands that had mixed together on the unfenced ranges and to separate the new calves and the mavericks for branding. An organized system of district roundups, held in the Spring and Fall, came into being in the late Seventies. The Spring roundup, when the new crop of calves was branded, was the more important occasion. Main business of the Fall event would be to select cattle for the late market.

Apart from its business function, the roundup was and is a great social event of the cow country. Old friends and new would meet; songs were sung and stories exchanged around the campfire. The present-day highly organized rodeos had their beginnings here, when cowboys from the various outfits would pit professional skills.

After all concerned had met at an appointed spot, the chuck wagon and the remuda would leave to make camp in the center of the first range circle to be worked over, followed shortly by the cowboys. Next morning after breakfast, the roundup super would assign groups of riders to sectors of the circle, and the drag would get under way.

BY midday, the cattle driven along by the different units toward the central roundup ground would be gathered in a great, dusty herd. That afternoon, the herd would be divided by hard-riding waddies into two parts—one called the "day herd," made up of steers and bulls, the other composed of cows with their calves and the mavericks. After the calves had been branded with their mothers' marks, and the mavericks divvied up amongst the several owners concerned and then branded, the calves and mavericks would be turned into the day herd.

Finally, after the entire roundup area had been covered by sections this way, the different brands would be separated and driven back to their owners' individual ranges.

In the case of a roundup on a large spread by one rancher, representatives of neighboring outfits, or "reps," would be on hand to claim any stock that had wandered onto that range.

Roundups still work along the same lines today.

TO THE READER

There is still an acute shortage of the kind of paper on which this magazine is usually printed. Therefore you may find that this issue does not seem as thick as formerly. The publisher wishes to assure you that there are still just as many pages as ever, and to ask your forbearance until the paper situation again becomes normal.

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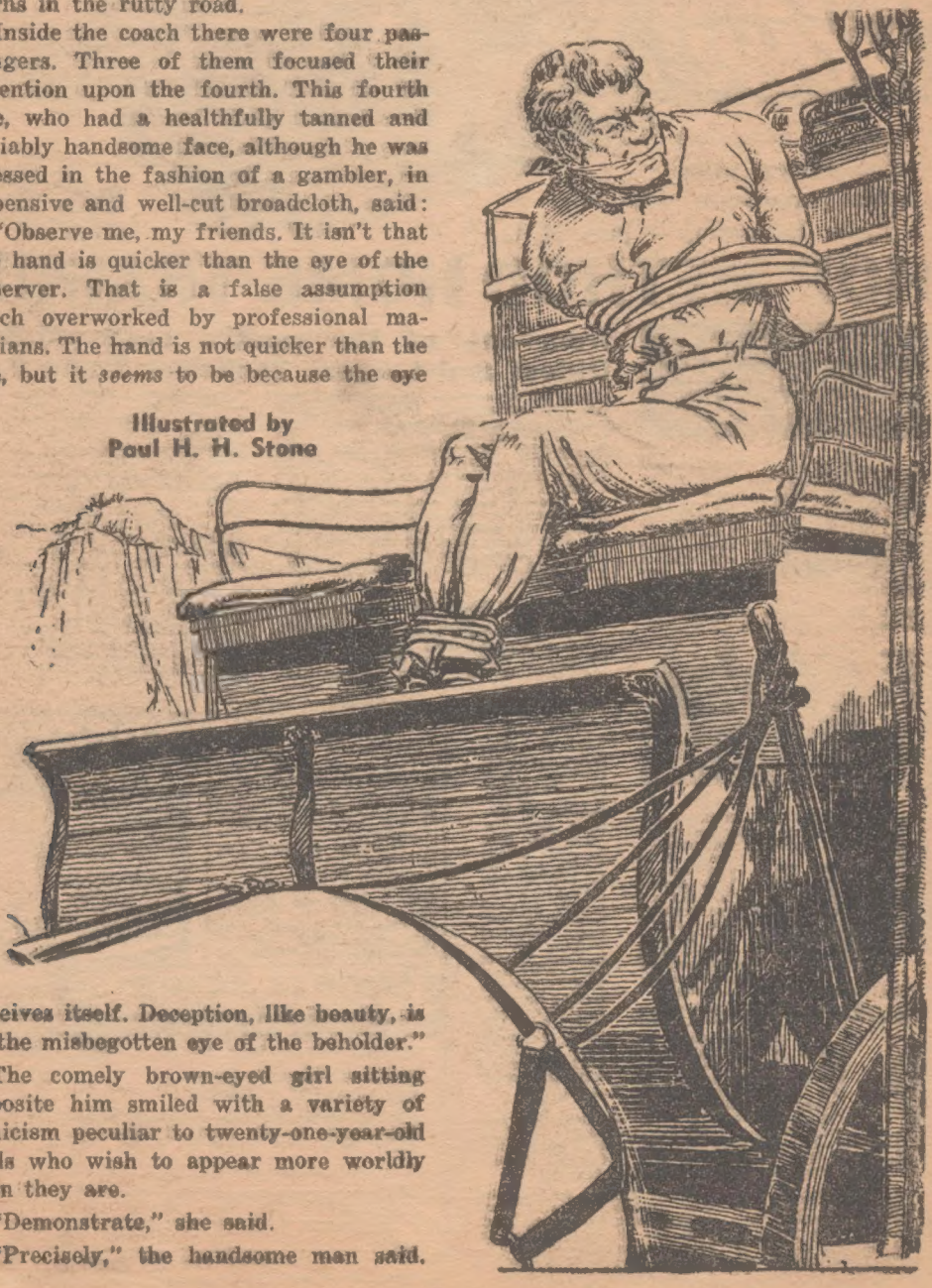
THE stagecoach swayed through the Arizona badlands like a quick-rich cowpoke at the peak of a Saturday-night celebration. The road was rough, but the four-horse hitch eased down from a trot to a walk only when there were steep inclines or sharp turns in the rutty road.

Inside the coach there were four passengers. Three of them focused their attention upon the fourth. This fourth one, who had a healthfully tanned and amiably handsome face, although he was dressed in the fashion of a gambler, in expensive and well-cut broadcloth, said:

"Observe me, my friends. It isn't that the hand is quicker than the eye of the observer. That is a false assumption much overworked by professional magicians. The hand is not quicker than the eye, but it *seems* to be because the eye deceives itself. Deception, like beauty, is in the misbegotten eye of the beholder."

Illustrated by Paul H. H. Stone



The comely brown-eyed girl sitting opposite him smiled with a variety of cynicism peculiar to twenty-one-year-old girls who wish to appear more worldly than they are.

"Demonstrate," she said.

"Precisely," the handsome man said. He tossed a half dollar upward to the roof of the stagecoach. The coin came down lazily into his upthrust hand. He flicked his fingers lightly, opened his hand, spread the fingers, and revealed the complete absence of the coin.

The cowboy, who was sitting at the

Trail To Trouble

By TONTO GREEN

It started out with a mighty peculiar stagecoach holdup which threw together the gambler, the girl, the financier and the cowpuncher in a dramatic mix-up that combined robbery, treachery, gunsmoke, romance and rawhide hate!

The fat bandit rasped: "Where the hell you all headin' for — over the hill to the hot poorhouse?"

handsome man's side on the back seat of the coach, grinned. "Went down your sleeve," the cowboy said. "Seen it."

"You did?" the handsome man asked. He tilted his arm downward, shook the sleeve vigorously. Nothing fell out of it. The cowboy blinked. The girl, sitting

with her pompous-looking middle-aged father on the front seat, facing the rear, smiled with the fine, sure, ignorant skepticism of youth.

"It's a trick," she said.

"Yes," said the handsome man. "And most of it is in your eyes, not in my hands." He slowly removed his flat-crowned broad-brimmed hat with his right hand and, with his left hand, plucked the fifty cents from his thick mat of dark hair with two slow-moving fingers. "You see," he said.

"But we don't see." The girl smiled.

Her father coughed pompously. He looked like a financier, which, in fact, was approximately what he was.

"I reckon you ought to be able to tell fortunes too, stranger," the cowboy said.

"If I had that ability in any outstanding degree, I would first of all predict a pleasant future for myself," the handsome man stated. He smiled and there was a faint trace of irony in the wrinkles around his eyes. He leaned back in the seat, crossed his legs, and stared in meditation out the window.

THE GIRL and her father, plainly enough, had originated somewhere in that vaguely vast area known to native frontiersmen as the East. The man wore a derby hat in a big-city manner; his jowls gave him an appearance of bloated dignity, and his eyes were aloof, slightly suspicious of everything, or seemed to be. The girl's resemblance was most evident in the mouth, the nose, and the general outline of the features. They appeared to be in the well-to-do financial bracket, certainly.

The cowboy, who had gotten onto the stage at a station about forty miles back, had a good-natured boyish aspect, though he was somewhere in his early twenties.

One of those mutual and not-quite-explainable silences fell over them now as the stagecoach jolted into the badlands. They had somehow gotten onto the subject of magic—perhaps because the girl had stated aloud a wish that some magician would remove her from this bumpy vehicle and deposit her at their destination—and the handsome, faintly mysterious passenger had demonstrated that one trick. They wanted more, for all humans are fascinated by magic, but there was some sort of dignity in him that made the girl or the young man hesitate to ask him for more . . . .

His dignity didn't desert him a few minutes later when he squinted his eyes out the window of the stagecoach, reached into his pocket and put a small pair of binoculars to his eyes. He stared through them out the window for some seconds, intently, and said: "I think I shall make a prediction now, and with certainty of its accurate conclusion."

The girl smiled slightly. "And that prediction?"

"This stagecoach is going to be held up within the next four minutes—and its occupants, or passengers, in fact, are going to be held up twice within that time."

The girl looked startled. Her father's eyes were closed and he was snoring slightly. The cowboy squinted.

"How come?" the cowboy asked.

"Why?" the girl inquired. "What makes you think so?"

"Because," said the man who looked like a gambler, gently, "*I'm* going to hold up the passengers now, for number one."

He calmly produced a derringer from his right-hand coat pocket and pointed it at the young cowpoke in particular.

The cowpoke blinked and gulped and said: "You plumb looked like a right galoot up to now. You make me a heap sad, as it vexes me to be stuck up by anybody. I ain't got much and I like to keep it."

"Sorry," the gambler said. "If you want to do anything about it, wait for a better chance." Still looking at the cowboy, the gambler said out of the right side of his mouth, addressing the girl: "Please remove all the jewelry you're wearing; put it into your handbag and toss the handbag to me."

AT this point the girl's father awakened, blinked, and looked startled. He stared at the derringer and inquired

in a heatedly ponderous tone: "What is the meaning of this, sir?"

"I should imagine its meaning is clear enough without diagrams," the gambler stated. At the moment he was removing the cowpuncher's six-gun from its holster. The gambler said now to the girl's father: "Toss me that briefcase and your wallet. Hurry!"

The financier sputtered and became suddenly somewhat purplish in the face. "Y-you . . . you can't—!"

"Yes I can." The gambler elevated the derringer significantly an inch, pointed it at the fat man's middle vest button. "I told you to hurry."

Sputtering and turning even more purple, the financier tossed the briefcase to the gambler, fumbled in his pocket for the wallet and tossed that also to the gambler.

Swiftly, keeping the derringer in his hand and the wary gaze of one eye upon the young cowpuncher, the gambler removed the money and jewelry from the girl's handbag and dumped them into the briefcase. Then he emptied the financier's fat wallet, except for a few one-dollar bills and a couple of five-dollar gold pieces, and dumped that into the briefcase—putting several dollar bills and some small change into the girl's handbag.

Then, surprisingly enough, the gambler took out his own wallet and emptied the contents, except for a few dollars and some change, into the briefcase. He said to the cowpuncher:

"I don't suppose you have much money, have you?"

"Eight or nine bucks, you weasel-livered coyote," said the cowpuncher. "You might as well have that too, so's I'll have a better reason for killin' you the first time I set eye on you again."

"True." The gambler nodded and smiled. "Keep whatever silver you have, and one dollar bill. Give me the remainder. Quickly, please!"

The cowpoke did as ordered, squinting balefully and muttering. The gambler put those few dollars into the briefcase with the remainder of his plunder. As a sort of afterthought, it seemed, he removed a couple of heavy gold rings from his finger and a heavy, fancy gold watch from his watch pocket and put them into the briefcase. He added the binoculars.

At this point the badlands were in the nature of rough cut-up hills, with here and there a cluster of scrawny trees or cacti near the road or on the sides of the steep hills. The road, which had been cut through following the line of least resistance rather than the shortest distance between two points, wound in and out with many abrupt turns.

Just before the stagecoach rounded an abrupt turn to the right, the man who was dressed like a gambler calmly opened the little window at his right and tossed the briefcase into a clump of scrub cottonwood trees, at the base of which there grew some mangy-looking but fairly high grass. A moment later the stagecoach was around the bend, with the cut-off hill between it and the well-laden briefcase.

The young cowpuncher was goggling at the gambler with mixed anger and bewilderment. "What was the idea of that, stranger?"

"Part of the same idea as this," the gambler stated. He swiftly unloaded the young puncher's six-gun, tossed the cartridges out the window and put the gun back into the puncher's holster.

At that moment two gunshots sounded from nearby and the stagecoach suddenly started to slow down and some vivid, resonant cusswords split the autumn skies from the driver on the seat up front atop the coach.

THE STAGECOACH came to a full stop at about the same time the driver's profanity did. But before that happened, the gambler had swiftly lifted his trouser leg and dropped the little derringer down into his right boot. "Just to avoid the temptation to get myself shot," he explained in a low tone, smiling. "You see, this is the second holdup I told you was going to occur. Please obey instructions. You've little to

lose now, and Lord Lobo has a nervous trigger finger. So have his assistants."

"Lord what?" the girl asked, looking alarmed and peering out through the shutters of the stage door.

"You'll see in a very short time," the gambler said.

The financier was spluttering nervously, his eyes were popping in his fat face and he was moving his gaze to and fro in agitation from one door to the other. The young cowpuncher's jaw set hard and he inched his hand toward the handle of his six-gun.

"Don't," the gambler advised him, and reminded him: "It isn't loaded, and you'll merely get shot."

By now there was the sound of horses outside—one horse sliding and braking its way down the shale-covered slopes on each side of the stagecoach.

And from up front, in the road near the stage driver, a pleasant but businesslike English-accented voice caroled:

"I say, old squash, we're obliged to trouble you for that strongbox you're transporting."

"Ain't no strongbox this trip, yuh damn' fool!" the middle-aged driver yelled. "If I was carryin' anything valuable, there'd be a shotgun guard sittin' up here beside me! Ain't that plain enough?"

"Quite insufficiently plain," the English-accented voice said. "I suspect you and the establishment which employs you to be thoroughly capable of deceit, you know."

"Damn it, I'm tellin' you—!"

"Really, I find you exasperating, old chap!" the British voice said. "We are worthy and diligent highwaymen"—there was light mockery in his tone—"and thrifty, in some respects. We have a disinclination to lighten our supply of ammunition by pouring needless quantities into your anatomy. O'Toole, will you please ascend and inspect the top of the stagecoach and the contents of the stage boot?"

"Sure, melord," one of the assistant bandits replied; there was laughter in his tone.

The stage driver yelled irately: "I tell yuh, there ain't nothin' up here wuth—!"

"We shall be the judge of that!" the British voice snapped. "Keep your hands elevated!" And then, to the other assistant bandit, who, with gun in hand, had been idly peering through the right-hand door of the stagecoach: "Inspect the passengers, Falstaff."

"Mighty pronto, melord," said the second assistant bandit. He, too, revealed traces of hardboiled laughter in his tones. Brusquely he jerked the stagecoach door open. He wore a chamois-skin mask that covered his whole face; otherwise he was dressed very much in the manner of a cowpuncher, except that he was extremely fat—which was something that a cowpuncher, by the arduous nature of his labors, couldn't conveniently afford to be.

His eyes ranged swiftly over the four occupants of the passenger compartment and he was in the middle of saying, "Lift yore hands slow and highlike," when his gaze focused upon the gambler and the words broke off in mid-emission.

"I'll be a windbroke geldin', melord! Who you reckon one of these here passengers is?"

"Sir Thomas Drake, perhaps?" the chief bandit asked lightly.

"It's our old friend Bannister, the gamblin' man!"

"Indeed? Rare fortune!" The man with the English accent had dismounted and now he pulled open the opposite door of the stagecoach and gazed calmly at the occupants. The bandit chief wore the same sort of chamois-skin mask, concealing his whole face, but his attire otherwise was different from that of the bandit whom he had whimsically addressed as Falstaff. This top man of the bandit trio wore a black silk shirt, a flat-crowned and broad-brimmed black hat from the band of which a large red feather thrust up jauntily on the right side. There was a pearl-handled .45 in his right hand.

He bowed slightly from the waist and

there seemed to be a mocking glitter in the eyes behind the narrow slitholes of the mask.

"Cheerio! After long absence, old squash!"

"Too long," Bannister said, smiling with grim amiability. "I've been craving a chance to be vexed at you close up, and this looks like it."

"Indeed it does. But a futile chance, perhaps. Eh, what?"

"You never can tell," Bannister said.

CHAPTER II

Loot for the Lobo

FOR perhaps twenty seconds the two men remained as they were, immobile, looking at each other; neither revealed nervousness or apprehension, and yet it was clear enough from the tension that pervaded the silence that there was thorough enmity here—an enmity not basically lessened by the seeming ironic

The proprietor of the wayward inn discussed his various reckless heroic endeavors of the days when he too had been a part of loathesome humankind.

amiability that the two revealed on the surface of their action.

This peculiar tension was broken by the raucous yell of the bandit O'Toole —which certainly wasn't his real name— from up front on or near the driver's seat:

"This driver polecat was lyin', melord! There's a strongbox up hyar in the stage boot and it's plenty heavy."

"I suspected as much," the chief bandit said. "It was doubtless the purpose of the presumably shrewd officials of the stage-line company to deceive all potential seekers of sudden prosperity, such as ourselves, into the belief that no pelf of value was being transported aboard this conveyance."

The young cowpuncher goggled at him. "Do you always talk thataway, stranger?"

"Only when of sound mind, as now." The bandit bowed slightly from the waist and contemplated the girl's appearance briefly. Then, to the bandit above: "Search the luggage atop, O'Toole. If you discover aught of interest, I shall jolly well appreciate your letting me know."

At this point Falstaff inquired: "You done promised me all the trifiin' personal takin's that the passengers have on 'em, didn't you, melord?"

"Quite so, my portly partner in sin. You may search them."

Falstaff waggled his six-gun at the passengers. "Come out here one at a time. It'd be plumb cramped for me to come inside."

Bannister, the gambling man, arose and stepped out the right-hand door to the ground near the fat bandit. Warily, the big buscadero searched with his left hand—and emitted a few hearty cusswords, plus:

"A few bucks cash, no jewelry, no watch—how come?"

"Search his boots," suggested Lord Lobo, the English-accented chief bandit. "My friend Bannister is accustomed to carrying large sums when he has been winning, as I am reliably informed he has been doing of recent weeks . . . and he is a cove of devious devices, if I may say so."

"Remove yore boots, pronto!" Falstaff ordered.

Bannister smiled serenely and removed the right boot, handed it to the hog-fat gunman. Something rattled in the boot. The bandit turned it upside-down and the derringer fell out into his hand.

"Hidin' it out, huh?" Falstaff snarled.

"Not very successfully, it appears." Bannister continued to smile. He removed the other boot.

Falstaff shook it, felt inside it. Nothing there. He handed the boots back, muttering: "Mighty peculiar, you havin' so little on you." He had searched the gambler's clothes with great care, and there was no possibility of a hide-out pocket that he could have missed. "All right. Get back in there."

Bannister got back in, after putting his boots on. At that moment O'Toole leaned over the top of the coach roof, which had a little foot-high iron railing around it to keep the luggage from jostling off, and yelled:

"Melord, do yuh find this here aught of interest?" And he dangled a couple of intimate pink undergarments down in front of the face of his chief.

"I say! A bit embarrassing for the young lady. Restore them, varlet, retaining one as a souvenir of her beauty and impeccable taste, if you will."

"I will, melord. Livin' too much in the great outdoors makes a man forgit the poisonous magnet of female charms. There ain't much of any account in any of the suitcases, except for some fancy shirts which we might's well take along, an' some fine-smellin' shavin' soaps and lotions and similar luxuries."

"Take them," Lord Lobo ordered casually. "Put them into one valise . . . and lower the strongbox. It is equipped with handles?"

"Yep. Three. One on each end and one in front. Mighty handy for carryin'. Or was you intendin' to open it hyar?"

"No. Someone might intrude along this highroad and cause us needless irritation. We shall carry it with us and shoot

the lock off at our leisure . . . unless it is too burdensome. What is its weight?"

"No more'n sixty or seventy pounds, melord."

"Easily transportable, in that case," Lord Lobo said.

FALSTAFF, meanwhile, had beckoned the girl, the fat derby-hatted man who looked like a financier and the young cowpuncher out to be searched—removing the latter's six-gun first of all and staring at it in bafflement because it contained no cartridges.

"Have times been tough for you?" the cowpuncher asked.

"Huh? Why . . . uh . . . not good lately. Why?"

"If you think times have been tough for you," the cowboy stated, "take a look at my gun—no bullets, even."

This jest did nothing to improve the state of Falstaff's disposition, and that disposition became worse when he discovered how slim were the takings from these victims too. He cursed even more heartily and glared at them suspiciously.

"Where the hell you all headin' for—over the hill to the hot poorhouse?" he rasped. "Females as well-dressed as this'n usually have a heap more jewels than one no-account ring; and gents who look like Eastern financi-ers as a general rule are carryin' more'n six dollars and thirty-seven cents on 'em, just in case they get hungry, like. Damn' if I don't feel like gut-shootin' the lot of you!"

"Come Falstaff!" Lord Lobo said sharply. "I say! A man of your magnificent proportions is customarily imperturbable and, according to tradition, jovial even in the face of disappointment. Are you conceivably capable of forgetting that we are achieving the strongbox, which beyond reasonable doubt contains a valuable quantity of gold ingots from the mining territory to the north?"

Falstaff grunted and muttered: "Looks mighty fishy, anyways. Maybe they hid their dinero and jewelry under the seats."

"Possibly. If it will improve your state of approaching indigestion, you may search inside the coach. But hurry, please." Lord Lobo gestured with his gun. "I wish to depart. All four of you come out on this side."

THE four passengers disembarked again, and while Falstaff thrust his weighty self gruntingly in through the opposite door, Lord Lobo stood back at a distance and idly regarded Bannister.

"Where," the chief bandit inquired, "are you concealing your wampum, my friend?"

Bannister shrugged and smiled. "Maybe Lady Luck ran off and left me . . . with a traveling man or a faro dealer or an ash-collector."

"Will you permit me my doubts?" Lord Lobo bowed slightly, mockingly, from the waist. "You may recall, with disfavor, the occasion on which you had just won eighteen thousand dollars in a contest at stud poker in southern Utah and I, with my companions, had the good fortune and perspicacity to relieve you of this burden?"

"Yes, I recall it, somehow." There was a special wryness in Bannister's smile. "And, as you say, I recall it with disfavor. I intend to charge you interest, inasmuch as I figure it only as a loan. And I recall how unnecessarily your varlet Falstaff gut-shot one of the gents in that game."

From inside, at this point, Falstaff produced a few variations of his previous cursing and roared: "Not a damn' thing in here—not under the seats or anywhere! I still figger we oughta gut-shoot 'em! That'll fix it so they won't pull no more tricks on honest eveners like us!"

"It might easily fix it so that the wrath of the countryside would outnumber our own diminutive forces," Lord Lobo reminded him. "The overtempting of ill fate is best avoided by the wise and by the unwise alike. Come!" And to O'Toole, above: "Lower the strongbox. To tarry is to tempt the displeasure of fortune."

O'Toole had tied the stage driver securely, and now O'Toole lowered the foot-

square strongbox, the lid of which was secured by two heavy padlocks. Falstaff caught the metal box in his powerful arms and carried it across the road, where he tied it onto an especially heavy and stiff and well-adapted saddle skirt which was part of Lord Lobo's horse's saddle.

Carrying a valiseful of stolen clothes and luxuries, the bandit O'Toole descended from the top of the stagecoach.

"It is with regret that we depart," Lord Lobo said. "I trust, in all earnestness, that the remainder of your journey may be a delight and that your wits may be of quality sufficient to provide you with food and shelter at the conclusion of your—"

"Can't I gut-shoot just *one* of 'em?" Falstaff inquired, disappointment in his tone.

"No," said Lord Lobo. He gestured to his two assistants to mount their horses, and when they had done this he did likewise.

"We're all headed for Phoenix, which is a long way off," Bannister stated calmly. "I don't suppose you could leave the lady and her father, at least, a little eating money?"

"Sorry, old squash, but the personal plunder is in the keeping of Falstaff. How do you feel on the subject of sharing, old oyster?"

"They already cheated me outa plenty, someways," Falstaff growled. "I don't know just how they did it—but I knew they oughta had more on 'em. To hell with 'em! Let 'em starve. That'll teach 'em not to play tricks."

Lord Lobo shrugged at the victims. "You see? My Falstaff maintains an attitude of less than geniality, which is a misfortune you must bear. Cheerio!"

With O'Toole lingering behind, idly aiming his gun at the quarry, Lord Lobo and Falstaff rode up the slight decline east of the road and proceeded eastward across the rolling badlands.

When they disappeared from sight in a dip a half mile or more distant, O'Toole waved at the four standing beside the stagecoach, shouted: "Take it easy and you'll plumb keep yore health!" and spurred his horse in pursuit of his two companions.

CHAPTER III

Night for the Nerves

BANNISTER smiled, reflectively watching the bandit O'Toole disappearing. He turned slowly, gauged the distance of the sun above the horizon and said to the others:

"Less than an hour to sunset. Just as well—though I doubt that our bandit friends will be back, even if they discover their mistake within the next few minutes."

"Mistake?" the girl asked, looking at him uneasily. "Oh, you mean about your saving most of our money and jewelry from them?"

"No, I don't mean that," Bannister stated. Still smiling, though with traces of grimness in it, he turned to the young cowpuncher. "Would you mind going back and getting that briefcase? It's only a few rods back around that sharp bend. I'll untie the driver and we'll high-tail out of here—just in case those three skunkaroos *do* discover their present images in the eyes of the sky."

"Images?" the girl asked.

"The images of three goats," Bannister said wryly.

He ascended, untied the stage driver—who spat the piece of cloth with which he had been gagged and issued the following statement: "If I could git my claws on them three yeller-bellied - - - - - - - - - - - - - -, I'd—"

"You'd lose your claws, beyond a doubt," Bannister told him.

"Yeah? You bring 'em back hyar an' see!"

"It's more comfortable without them," Bannister said. "Besides, they didn't do much damage—except to their pride, when they find out that . . ."

The aging stage driver squinted at him. "Find out what?"

"Tell you later," Bannister stated.

Blinking and muttering, the stage driver rubbed the kinks out of his wrists and ankles, bit off a chaw of eating tobacco and felt healthier.

Bannister hit him alongside the ear with his new six-gun.

"How far is it down the line to Silver Gulch?" Bannister asked.

"Three or four mile," said the driver. "And damn' little to see, except ore tailin's, after you get there. They worked that silver vein right down to enough

to drip the date onto a last dime. Why?"

"Isn't there a stage line still running through Silver Gulch east and west?"

"Yeah. But not much of a one."

"Doesn't that stage line go over to Yellowtail twenty miles or so west where they made that placer-gold strike a few months ago?"

"Yep. But thar's only one through each way every day; or leastways that's all there've been lately," the driver said.

"What time does the westbound one go through Silver Gulch?"

"Middle of the afternoon."

"Then we've missed it?"

"Yep. I thought you was goin' all the way to Phoenix with me, mister."

"Changed my mind," Bannister stated. "Anyway, I understand Yellowtail is a lively boomtown, with plenty of floating dinero."

"What I hear, that's so," the driver admitted.

At this point the young cowpuncher arrived in their midst with the briefcase. He handed it to the man in the derby hat and said: "Scarred up a mite, but don't seem to be damaged serious."

"Thank you," the derby-hatted man said gruffly, but looking at Bannister instead of the cowpuncher. "Well, I presume we are free to resume our journey, gentlemen?"

"Free enough for now," Bannister said.

They got in.

WHEN the stage was well under way, a splendid silence settled in for a few minutes. The derby-hatted man sat there clutching the briefcase as if he owned all the contents; he was chewing a cigar and scowling. The girl was thoughtful; she looked down at the floor, clasping and unclasping her hands slowly. The cowpuncher, too, stared at the floor, and from time to time his right hand slipped up and touched his empty holster.

Bannister lighted a tailormade cigarette, sat there alternately smiling and frowning. Presently he stopped frowning and let the smile take over. He said:

"Now that everything is uncomfortably unsettled, it might be sensible to get a loop on those little snakes writhing around inside you. Fire the questions—but before you do, I'll trouble you for that briefcase, sir, in order to distribute the contents."

The derby-hatted man looked up, looked startled, and instinctively clasped the briefcase more tightly.

"I think we may safely trust him with it, dad," the girl said, with caressing female irony. She turned, looked at Bannister and continued: "We understand of course, now, why you 'held us up', as you called it—but we wonder why you couldn't have explained the reason."

"Because," Bannister said tersely, "most humans are even stupider than they seem to be. Likely you wouldn't have believed me if I'd explained exactly how you were going to be held up. At any rate, you'd have argued about it too long."

THE young puncher turned toward him abruptly. "What I'd like to know is—if you saw them bandits through your spyglass and knew they aimed to hold us up, why didn't you tell me? We could've shot it out with them."

Bannister laughed mirthlessly and looked at the young puncher with a shade of pity. Presently the gambler said:

"I have in me a trace of putrid sentimentality . . . for innocent bystanders. Especially"—he bowed slightly toward the girl—"when one of the innocent bystanders or- sitters is so fair of face and brown of eye, I didn't think it would be very good manners to get her shot by the enemy."

"But—"

"And moreover," Bannister continued, "they would have had all the advantage in any case. Having had a previous encounter with the three gentlemen, in Utah a few weeks ago, I knew that they are not as the gentle rain that falleth from the heavens. They have gained nothing, as it is . . . and I think my chances of encountering them under

more favorable conditions are quite good."

"Huh? How?"

"Time will decide. There is more to this escapade than meets the eye."

"Because the eye deceives itself?" the girl asked.

"The eye and the ear, too, maybe," said Bannister.

"In any event, your making that briefcase disappear was the finest practical exhibition of magic I've ever seen —and I for one am grateful. Hand him that briefcase, dad."

"Wha . . . uh . . . why, by all means." Bannister took the briefcase, opened it, carefully distributed the various items to their owners. "I might ask your names," he said, "now that we have known the sweet uses of adversity together. Unless you're fugitives, of course."

"I'm a fugitive from a square meal," the cowpuncher said. "My name's Correll."

"My name is Sue Harris"—the girl curtsied with mock shyness—"and my father varies according to circumstance."

"Hrrrumph! Really, Sue, is this the way you show parental devotion?" The derby-hatted man's face reddened. "My name is Rodney Pauncefote Harris and I am a financier, sir."

"I noticed that," Bannister admitted dryly.

"Speaking of names," the girl said, "who is Lord Lobo and how did he get that name?"

"Nobody knows who he is," Bannister told her. "Maybe his two assistants do, but even that seems doubtful, to me. The Lord part comes from his English accent, of course, and the Lobo part comes from his spiritual resemblance to a wolf. I *do* know that I'm not likely to run onto him away down there in Phoenix, so I'm not going to Phoenix. Where are *you* heading?"

"Did I hear you say something about a prospering goldstrike town somewhere west of here?" Harris asked.

"Yes. A town named Yellowtail."

"That's where we're going," Harris said, with difficulty keeping a note of hopeful greed out of his voice.

The young cowpuncher looked at the girl, as he had been doing frequently since getting in. He gulped, looked down at the floor and said: "I figured to look in on Yellowtail myself. May get myself a job freightin'."

THE STAGECOACH reached Silver Gulch about sundown. Silver Gulch wasn't an absolute ghost town, but it was the closest thing to it. All the buildings except one were abandoned. The rickety two-story hotel was a team-changing station for the stageline and the irascible old man who owned the establishment rasped:

"So the four of you want to stay all night, do ye? An' eat supper an' breakfast an' dinner tomorra noon, too, eh? Damn' nuisance, but I reckon I'll have to put up with it."

"What you runnin' this place for?" the puncher asked, his jaw dropping agape.

"Because it took me sixty-odd years to figger thar's plumb no good in humans an' most of 'em go right through hyar, which is just right, as I see 'em on'y glancin'ly, which is enough. Got a couple pet skunks I respect an' which suit me better. What d'ye want for supper? Fried spuds an' boiled beans is what ye're gittin'. Plain bread with no butter is two bits extry."

The stage driver ate supper with them —it cost the four ex-passengers five dollars and twenty-five cents apiece—and went outside to hitch on the fresh four horses and continue on his way to the end of the line at Phoenix.

Bannister followed him out and as the driver was getting up onto the seat to proceed, Bannister handed him a sealed envelope. "For your boss in Phoenix. If he's convinced you're a good-enough man, as I'm convinced, he'll tell you

something that'll make your hair tingle a little around the roots."

"I'm dang near bald, so it won't make me faint, will it?"

Bannister smiled. "Not likely you'll be held up again. If you are held up, let 'em. I notice the three this afternoon didn't bother the mail sacks."

"Nothin' in 'em but personal letters. That O'Toole hombre looked inside the sacks an' left 'em."

"See you again some time short of the Last Roundup," Bannister said. *"Adios."*

The passengerless stage went on down the road and vanished into the starless night.

Bannister went back into the rickety "hotel" and presently the cantankerous proprietor showed them to their four separate rooms—at four dollars each per sleep, food being more precious than space in these parts.

The bed had no sheets and the blankets were still dusty after he'd shaken them out. The mattress was lumpy and the bedsprings like the peaks of parallel mountain ranges. Evidently the proprietor hadn't been kidding about his solidly acquired aversion to the human race.

In this circumstance, it wasn't difficult for Bannister to meditate for a couple of hours. He thought some thoughts that distinctly would have baffled any mindreader prying into the secrets of his skull. Such thoughts as:

Well, it has to be Yellowtail town they'll show up. There's no drugstore or doctor here in this coyote hole. Yellowtail is much nearer than any other town—and it's a boomtown, where everybody's so busy and so greedy that nobody pays much attention to strangers . . . They certainly won't go across sixty miles of waterless badlands eastward. It has to be Yellowtail. And they won't be much afraid of posses, because the nearest lawman is forty-odd miles down the line south of here. Yes, it'll be Yellowtail . . .

Moderately well convinced by these hopeful meditations, Bannister presently dropped off into uncomfortable sleep.

CHAPTER IV

Plan for a Payoff

TO vary handsomely the monotony of his guests' diet, the proprietor provided them with a breakfast consisting of boiled beans, fried potatoes, and doughy hotcakes, devoid of butter or syrup. The coffee, which had plainly been standing on the stove for three days, had an even more hearty flavor of alkali with subtle overtones of a skunk's favorite odor.

"No wonder it takes greatness of heart to conquer this vast romantic frontier," the girl said, making a cute wry face and covertly watching to see if Bannister, who was quite handsome and pretty obviously honorable, noticed the cute wryness of it.

"Fifty years from now," said Bannister, "even the discomfort and dust will seem romantic. I think those nickelodeon flicker pictures will be right important things someday—molding everybody's life into shapes of wondrous beauty and nobility. Meanwhile"—he looked at his watch—"it's now, and I wish that east-west stagecoach would get a crazy streak and show up here three hours ahead of time."

"You . . . you don't suppose those three highwaymen will come by this way?" Rodney Pauncefote Harris inquired, with moderate trepidation.

"Not likely," said Bannister. "There's an outside chance they even now don't know they're goats—and if they do, yesterday's stagecoach is much too long-gone south of here for them ever to catch up with it. And certainly the bill of fare at this resort would repel rather than allure even such charmingly calloused creatures as those three."

After breakfast, Bannister went up onto the rickety roof and scanned the entire surrounding country through his binoculars. The view was good enough, and if anybody had been coming out of the badlands this way it would have been

Bannister opened his eyes, and there was quite a crowd around him, and his head was somehow on a female's lap.

a cinch to see him on one of the rises miles away, for the air was remarkably clear.

There'd be no reason for them to come this way, Bannister reasoned. They'd figure he was still on the stagecoach and a hundred miles or so down the line by now.

He went back downstairs. The proprietor, despite his avowed aversion to humans, was revealing no unwillingness to discuss his various heroic endeavors and

the reckless color of his adventures in the days when he too had been part of the otherwise loathesome human race.

From time to time Bannister renewed his trip to the roof with the binoculars, with the same satisfactorily blank result.

At noon the northbound stage stopped, changed horses, and the driver ate. He was carrying a couple of passengers of no consequence to the hotel's guests.

Sue Harris made herself as fascinating as possible to Bannister with her eyes and her conversation, virtually ignoring the sheep-eyed young cowpuncher who needed much more than Bannister did the charm she was throwing the gambler's way.

SHORTLY after three o'clock, the westbound stage pulled in. This was no change station for it. It was carrying only one passenger, a drunken miner who snored resonantly all the twenty-two miles to Yellowtail.

The journey was uneventful and the stagecoach arrived in the boomtown a few minutes after sunset. The town was located on the western fringe of these badlands. There were greenish mountains to the west and the town itself was situated in a wide greenish canyon; along the sides of the creek in this canyon they were washing their placer claims, rare in Arizona Territory. It was not one of the West's great gold strikes, but it was a highly profitable one and would doubtless remain so until it was worked out in a couple of years. Bannister estimated that there must be a thousand or more inhabitants in the town.

At the stage depot the five passengers got their luggage—most of the top and rack behind were loaded with fresh food supplies, there being few farmers hereabouts, naturally enough—and Sue looked at Bannister and said hopefully:

"What now?"

"I think a hotel with beds more comfortable than a cactus patch and some food fit for a high-type hog, at least, would be sensible or thereabouts," the gambler said. The girl made him nervous. In her eyes he saw the early signs of that fine pure why-couldn't-we-settle-down-quietly-and-improve-the-quality-of-the-additional-population look. It was one of the few things on earth that legitimately frightened him—because even a man sound of wind, limb, and mind had so pitifully few defenses against this (to him) gross evil if the lady were attractive (as this one was) and intent.

They found four hotel rooms, in an establishment which actually had sheets on the beds and only an endearingly homey amount of dust. They deposited their luggage and went downstairs to eat and the coffee tasted at least a little like coffee and the potatoes weren't entirely saturated with grease and the young cowpuncher looked so sheep-eyed lovesick that he couldn't eat and this upset Bannister so much that he ate only a pound and a half of beefsteak instead of the two pounds he'd felt like eating.

When they'd finished eating, the girl smiled brightly at Bannister and asked: "What do they do to amuse themselves of an evening in this town, do you suppose?"

"I suppose they get ory-eyed drunk and lose their hard-earned landfalls to wicked gamblers," Bannister said. "Why should this town be any exception? As to amusements you might like—I noticed there's a crummy-looking opera house down the street, with some real live flesh-and-blood actors playing in a very fine melodrama. Why don't you and young Mr. Correll go see it?"

"That's a right smart suggestion, stranger!" The cowpoke's face brightened as much as the girl's face fell.

"I've some business to attend to," Bannister stated.

"Hrrrumph! And I too," Pauncefote Harris admitted. He looked at his daughter. "An excellent suggestion. Why not attend the theater, my dear?"

"Oh, all right," the girl said, and added in a sigh under her breath: "Damn it!"

BANNISTER and Rodney Pauncefote Harris walked up the street together and the gambler said casually: "Look, pardner, your business is your own, I suppose. But it's a one-way getaway from this town and if you made your getaway attired in feathers and tar, mightn't it be a little embarrassing to your daughter?"

"I beg your pardon, sir!" Mr. Harris looked at the gambler with great indignation.

"You might as well," Bannister said. "But I couldn't help seeing what your briefcase was mostly loaded with. I guess in this case maybe the gilt in gilt-edged should be spelled with a *u*—as a judge would spell it. Eh? I imagine the stock you're selling for that magnificent new alleged smelter in Denver is a sure-fire investment, eh?—Meaning a hundred percent profit for you."

"Sir!" Pauncefote Harris spluttered.

"Does your daughter work cahoots with you?"

"Certainly not!" This indignation was genuine. Then Mr. Harris caught himself. "That is . . . uh . . . I *never* discuss business matters with my daughter!"

Bannister looked at him sharply and, with his sharp gambler's instinct, saw that the man was telling the truth. "You mean, then, that she thinks you're leveling in your 'business'. She doesn't know you're a bare-souled swindler selling beautifully engraved stocks to gullible quick-rich fools?"

Mr. Harris started to splutter again and get red all over.

"Who are you, may I ask, to question *my* business practices, sir? You, a self-confessed gambler by profession!"

"The sheer nobility of this will sicken you, I'm sure," said Bannister calmly, "but I've never cheated anybody in my life. I've never had to; I'm a natural-born expert at playing cards. There are more gamblers like that than anyone suspects—I'd say fully four percent of them are like me."

"And why are you so interested in my daughter?" Mr. Harris spluttered. "What are your designs?" He glared.

"To escape *her* designs," Bannister said. He stopped in front of the town's one drugstore and said: "This is as far as I go. You can go where it pleases you. But I ran into a quick-rich fool up in northern Arizona last week. He'd bought some of your stock and telegraphed to Denver to check up. He discovered that your magnificent smelter consists of one mangy toolshed in the middle of twenty acres of weedy ground on the outskirts of an impossible slope—which is not quite a smelter four-fifths completed and ready to make its stockholders a fortune beginning within two or three months. Whose four-fifths-completed smelter did you photograph? They're nice pictures. Your printed prospectus and the gold leaf are mighty impressive, too. . . Why don't you give your daughter a break? You must have enough dinero salted by now to quit. Or is your profession too fascinating? Think it over. Good night—and remember that word about bogus stock and suchlike gets around fast sometimes, even out here in the wilderness."

Mr. Harris nodded briefly, with a plain mixture of unplain emotions visible in his face, and went up the street, briefcase under arm and indecision in his step.

BANNISTER stood there idly in front of the drugstore for a few moments and thought: *Now, why did I do that? What's it to me what happens to him? Let him chafe in his own hangnoose. What he's doing is maybe legally within the law, but the law out here has an abrupt way of revamping itself to suit personal whims.*

He shrugged and went into the drugstore and decided it didn't make any difference to him what happened to that female. Only trouble with her was she was attractive and seemed moderately bright, which was a dangerous extra added attraction. To hell with it. And immediately he caught himself wondering if that young cowpuncher was trustworthy.

Sure. Of course he was trustworthy. When they were sheep-eyed like that, their thoughts were on soul instead of earthier things.

And if the cowpuncher weren't trustworthy, then Sue Harris pretty plainly was.

There was nobody in the drugstore. Nobody he wanted to see. He hadn't thought there would be. No Lord Lobo or Falstaff or O'Toole with their faces showing. Falstaff probably had to be doubly careful about showing himself in any town; for in a land where fat men were rare, Falstaff would stand out like a volcano peak on a Kansas prairie.

Bannister bought himself a new six-gun.

He strolled around the town and discovered with pleasure that the office of the town's one doctor was located across the street about a block north of the drugstore. That was a break—and about time he got one, he thought. He could park near either place and keep an eye on the other at the same time.

Many things had happened to Bannister in his thirty-seven years. He still looked quite young and his tan, that came from spending quite a bit of spare time in the open hunting and fishing, contrasted notably with the usual pallor of gamblers. He'd been a gambler since the age of twenty, sometimes working for the house, sometimes on his own. He had no regrets, because, as he had candidly told Pauncefote Harris, Bannister had used skill alone to win. And he hadn't always won. Once in Nevada he'd been more than sixty thousand dollars to the good. And more than once he'd had it tough eating for weeks at a time. On the whole, prosperity had favored him much more than not.

In Utah a few weeks past, he'd hit a big streak, but that eighteen thousand Lord Lobo had held him up for so unexpectedly had been all he had. Since then the going had been bad. He'd borrowed twenty dollars and run it up to a couple of hundred in a small stud game up in northern Arizona last week. Then there'd been a holdup in a neighboring town; Lord Lobo—and it looked as if he and his two helpers might be working their way south. Knowing the manager of the stage line, Bannister had told him about the risk, and had volunteered, for a hundred dollars, to ride the next stage that carried anything really valuable south.

So Bannister had ridden that stage and yesterday, as he'd half expected, it had been held up by Lord Lobo. That stage was carrying nearly twenty thousand dollars' worth of gold dust—but not in the strongbox in the stage boot. The dust was packed in small sacks in a shallow false section of the coach's roof. Not even the driver knew that; he was a driver comparatively new to that stage line, and the owner trusted a driver only after long friendship. But the owner didn't know for sure how secret those secret specially built compartments of his coaches were. They'd been used for several years, and such secrets had a fashion for being discovered by shrewd highwaymen.

So now Bannister had a double reason for wanting to nail Lord Lobo, and to nail him so it stuck.

He'd planted the way to that—in that strongbox.

His whole hope resided in that strongbox.

Not tonight, but tomorrow night or the next . . . maybe Lord Lobo would have to come to town.

BANNISTER drifted around to the sheriff's office, liked the lawman's looks and manner, and explained the project in detail. The lawman said:

"Can you hoot like an owl?"

"Yes. Learned it young."

"Hoot four short hoots, and if I'm in hearin' I'll come a-snortin', or my deputy will."

"Much obliged," Bannister said, and strolled out.

He had a few drinks of redeye in a nearby saloon and decided to do no gambling tonight. It would be difficult to concentrate with Lord Lobo on his mind and that young female—

Thinking about her again! he thought—and gave himself up to it frankly for the next hour.

At the end of the *next* hour, he again decided to hell with her. Like almost every other woman on earth, she'd want to knock all the individuality and spirit out of him, civilize him and make him settle down, as they always called it, to some dull grind that would be worse than Deer Lodge Prison where, according to rumor at least, a man could play a friendly game of cards without being nagged.

When he finally left the saloon, the theater down the street was emptying and presently he saw the cowpoke with his arm linked in the arm of Sue Harris, and little hot coals galloped around in Bannister's chest. It wasn't his first experience at jealousy, because he'd lived thirty-seven years, after all—but it was the first time it had been like this. He went back and had two more slow drinks and got hold of himself, he thought, and presently went back to the hotel and went to bed without seeing any of the other three with whom that stagecoach had involved him. Where the hell were two of them—making romance in the park?

CHAPTER V

Taps for a Tough One

THE following day dawned bright and chipper, but Bannister didn't. By midafternoon it hadn't improved and neither had Bannister. He stayed as much by himself as possible but his usual inside calmness was vacationing. The girl had smiled at the sheep-eyed cowpuncher through most of breakfast, giving Bannister pretty much the distant treatment, and the two had gone off, with some vague idea of looking for a job for the puncher. But the afternoon finally got away with its tail dragging and Bannister went into the hotel for an early supper and they were just finishing ahead of him, the two of them.

Without knowing he was going to say it, Bannister told the young puncher: "Stick around a few minutes. I'll buy you another smokepole. Maybe we'll get a chance at Lord Lobo tonight."

"How come?" Correll asked.

"Yes, you've been unsuitably mysterious with your hints about that, *Mister* Bannister," the girl said primly.

"There was something in that strongbox that'll make them come to town," Bannister said irritably. "I may be mistaken about that, of course. Once I drew to an inside straight and didn't—"

"I'll go with you, an' glad to," the young puncher said, impressing her, he supposed.

"Do. Both of you," she suggested, and yawned elaborately.

THEY DID. It was just after dusk and they'd barely finished buying the gun and getting out of the store, which was right across the street from the drugstore. Bannister saw a man dismounting from a sorrel horse in the half-light in front of the drugstore and striding into the drugstore. There was something about the way the man strode, and his build—and the look of that sorrel horse—

"Let's take a *pasear!*" Bannister snapped.

He was across the street within five seconds and slowing up and with the cowpuncher right behind him was staring in through the drugstore's open door.

The man who had just gone in was wearing a fancy white silk shirt, the sleeves of which he was rolling up gingerly, and asking the druggist: "Will you kindly to hell tell me if this's leprosy, bubonic plague, or maunderin' meemies? It's all over my arms and hands and chest and face and it itches and swells and aches like the second Battle of Bull Run! Will you kindly to hell give me somethin' to put me out of my misery, before I go loco?"

"That's nothin' much," the druggist said, squinting. "Why don't you go see the croaker, Doc—"

"Here I am," Bannister said, right behind the customer. "Had your iron to-

day, O'Toole?" Then he swung O'Toole around.

O'Toole looked surprised, but not for long, because Bannister hit him alongside the ear with his new six-gun and O'Toole fell down into a semiconscious recline.

Bannister muttered a couple of words which cast reflection upon O'Toole's ancestry and said: "—Wearing my shirt, too, you misbegotten ——— — — ———!" He pointed at the black-initialed monogram on the right side of the collar. The initials were Bannister's: WJB.

Then a sudden thought struck the gambler. That mention of the town doctor. Maybe— Bannister swiftly shucked O'Toole's six-gun from its holster, handed it to the slightly dazed cowpuncher and snapped: "Watch him! Don't let him up or even close to you!"

Bannister sprinted out into the street and up toward the doctor's office. There was a light from the saloon windows next to the stairway that led up to the doctor's office.

A lean man in a black shirt was just coming down those stairs as Bannister started across the street. The man in the black shirt didn't notice Bannister just then, because the man in that black shirt was asking a passerby:

"Ah say theah, mistuh . . . could you-all info'm me wheah-at the doctuh man is? Ah done got me a li'l sickness heah an' I'd sho' admiuh to meet up with that-theah doctuh man."

Bannister stopped short in disappointment. Hell, that was no British accent! That was Deep-South Alabama. Up till that drawl issued forth, what with the black shirt like Lord Lobo's, he'd been almost certain this was Lobo.

On the point of turning back to the drugstore, Bannister suddenly changed his mind. As a gambler he'd learned to be thorough about things, and he decided to have a look at this man's hands just for luck.

The man had a fine, handsome, eagle-like profile and was well-shaped. The passerby was telling him that Doc Evans was a man who liked a few nips of red-eye in the evenin's, and why not try the saloons?

"Thank yuh, suh," the black-shirted man said, and moved toward the saloon. To do so he was obliged to cross through the light that came out strongly through the saloon window.

Bannister saw the hands and wrists. There was no doubt about it—those hands and wrists were sore and inflamed and swollen and scratched. Bannister said:

"Turn around easylike, with your hands high . . . melord."

The man in the black shirt stiffened and then he turned around, but not slowly or easylike. Perhaps he recognized that voice and the implications in it.

He came around rapidly and his hand was fast, considering its condition, in snatching that gun from holster. Bannister hadn't actually expected the other to do it, at that disadavntage.

They fired almost together and Bannister kept on firing even as he felt what seemed to be a combination of hornet and club on his head and the earth rising up to meet him . . . .

A SPLENDID, pert, tender voice was saying: "I knew the moment you tossed that briefcase out the window you were too good to belong to a deck of cards all your life. You're too nice and kind and spunky and brave and human—and oh, Lord, what dignity you have! Look at you—the dignity—lying here in the street all dusty, bleeding on the skull like a drunken guttersnipe with your head in a woman's lap! . . . But I'll forgive you, because that's customary when a woman's trapped about a man the way I'm trapped with you. Around my heart, like. Open your eyes, *Mister* Bannister!"

He opened his eyes and there was quite a crowd around him. Lord Lobo was lying there on the sidewalk in the light from the saloon window, and the sheriff and what was evidently the doctor were stooping over Lord Lobo, who was conscious but who looked quite badly shot up. The sheriff looked around at Ban-

nister, grinned and said:

"You forgot to whistle like a hoot owl."

A dignified elderly man detached himself from the crowd and spoke to Lord Lobo directly, with a trace of irony: "Last curtain, eh, Barry? It took me a minute to recognize you."

"Why . . . why, yo're one of them actors," the baffled young cowpoke said to the elderly man.

"Yes," said the actor. "So is, or was, Barry here. And a good one, too. We played stock in Kansas City and St. Louis together. He played everything from English lords to bandits and Mexicans and Southern plantation owners. In St. Louis he got jealous over a woman and shot a man and I guess . . . you figured with the law after you, you might as well become whole-hog outlaw, eh?"

Bannister muttered: "So that's how come the British accent and the Southern accent and—"

Her soft mocking voice broke in: ". . . And if mommum's itty husband wants to be a dweat big wicked gambler, hims tan teep on being one till hims makes a dweat big stake for us to settle down and be splendid respectable people on."

"Like hell!" Bannister tried to sit up and found that the pressure of her fingers on the cool cloth she was holding against his head was sufficient to keep his head in her lap.

In a perfectly normal actorish accent, Lord Lobo snarled at Bannister: "What the hell did you put into that strongbox with those gold-painted bars of lead? And into those dust pokes?"

"I'll swap secrets with you," Bannister said. "Tell us where Falstaff is and I'll tell you what's wrong with your carcass, aside from recent ventilation."

Lord Lobo hesitated, then he said: "He's waiting for us a half mile north of town, near the creek."

"Well," said Bannister, "I saw a flock of poison ivy up in northern Arizona a few days ago. I remembered what a dose of it had done to me when I was a kid, once. So I got to thinking, what if some smart bad bandits were to hold up this stagecoach I'm to guard all the way to Phoenix? What if they should find some bogus gold bricks all nicely, heavily dusted with fresh-ground-up poison ivy—and two gold pokes full of it? They'd dip their hands into it and likely rub it all over, not knowing what it was—"

"Falstaff got it into his eyes," Lord Lobo rasped. "They're swollen shut so that he can hardly tell daylight—"

"Where he's goin', it won't make much difference." The sheriff chortled.

Sue cooed into Bannister's ear: "So that was my dweat big wonderful man's wonderful trick! Lord, what dignity! You'll want a church wedding, won't I, a man of your dignity and all? Yes. So that's settled."

With a powerful surge of the will and muscles, Bannister surged upright, muttering: "But *I'm* not settled!" and got to his feet reeling a little. To the sheriff he said:

"Soon as I've had a few drinks to steady my head, we'll take melord along with us to put a loop on Falstaff—or gutshoot melord."

"That won't be necessary," Lord Lobo said. "I die here, like a ham, but not like Hamlet, and you get the Juliet, Bann—"

"I get some whiskey . . . and we'll see about your dying and the Juliet," Bannister said, reeling toward the saloon.

IN a saddle, with the whiskey in him, heading north for Falstaff, Bannister felt better. He thought: *I'll just keep right on riding, as soon as I've got my money from melord.*

He couldn't see the lady named Sue looking after him contentedly and thinking: *He'll be back, the poor helpless lamb.* Nor hear her saying softly to the young cowpuncher: "You're a nice boy, Correll . . . but there's nothing in you to tame or improve. Goodbye, and thank you."

And Bannister was thinking: *What a relief! She's long-gone!*

Except suddenly he knew that he was mistaken.

With a fine, happy, trapped, sinking feeling he realized that he would be riding back. To her.

Illustrated by
Al Savitts

By the time they were reining into the creek, he had them both in his gunsights.

BART LAYTON stood, tall and thin, in the shadow of Hank Marker's general store. He had dropped off the very much mixed local train down by the water tank.

"If this don't misfire, I can only get clawed up one way," he said grimly. "But if'n both gals turn onto me, I'm a benighted fool for making this quick pasear into Tamarack any whatsoever."

He stepped out into the vague glow of the general store's stingy lighting, a single oil lamp. His long, black store coat flapped to his knees. His round-crowned city hat was pulled down over oil-slicked hair.

Bart wore store shoes and long pants with creased legs. He was a sight for

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

Swing Your Boot Toes High

Layton hadn't meant anything wrong when he'd engaged himself to marry two girls at the same time. But the people of Tamarack County didn't treat such doings lightly

Tamarack to behold, but he wasn't permitting any of the town to do any beholding if he could avoid it.

Then Hank Marker saw him. The hard-faced, ranch-owning storekeeper was coming from the store. Bart could but hope that Hank Marker hadn't recognized him in the street darkness, and in these dude clothes.

Bart wished he hadn't held up listening to the dance over in the schoolhouse.

"Swing yore pardners, an' do-si-do!"

Carl Burns was the best caller in Tamarack county. Bart would have liked to walk in on that dance. But the wildest maverick puncher couldn't walk into a dance where two up and coming gals, the prettiest in the countryside, probably now were dancing.

Not when the aforesaid cow waddy has by his written word practically promised to marry both of them. Not any sudden weakness either. No siree. A double-branded, three-year-old, dyed-in-the-wool pledge to hitch up with—

Jean Gregg, for whose sake and at whose instigation he had left Tamarack county to become daubed and refined with such college culture as would make him a professor of something or other.

Laura Pasant, to whom he had written more and more friendly letters and whom he remembered as the gal hoss-buster of Tamarack. And who had wanted Bart Layton as he was, not giving a hang for anything more cultured than ability to rope, tie, and run a fast iron on a calf's hide.

Bart stayed in the shadows until Hank Marker clumped across to the schoolhouse. Maybe Hank had seen him. And if he had, how would he know Bart in this gad-awful dude rig in which he had been compelled to come home to Tamarack county.

Anyway, Hank Marker went into the schoolhouse. And almost immediately Bart saw Jean Gregg, the gal who had been finished off back east four years ago. The gal who had been promised to him since they had been neighbor kids. The gal who had demanded culture-coated romance.

Through the open schoolhouse door, Bart saw the prettiest gal, but one, in the county slip her tall willowy figure into Hank Marker's arms and whirl away. But not before Bart had seen Jean's face and her high-poised, dark head in the schoolhouse light.

"Kind o' quit bein' so choosy," muttered Bart, for he had noticed Hank Marker was wearing riding boots, tucked-in trousers, and his wool shirt without a coat. "'Pears like Jean raised sand with me the time four years ago I come to the shindig and hadn't rigged up like a gent, accordin' to her eastern school ideas. Now if I could hook her up with Hank Marker, that'd let go of one bear's tail."

Bart neglected to recollect that the night four years ago he had worn not only range boots, but bearskin chaps, two guns, and a 40-mule breath of Tamarack whisky.

Nevertheless, although he had switched his running loop from Jean to Laura Pasant, Bart had a queer empty feeling in the pit of his stomach at seeing Jean again, and dancing with the town's richest, middleaged bachelor.

Having an open chance, sure now that Hank Marker hadn't seen him, Bart Layton crossed to the livery stable run by Clem Devers. He had it in mind to make two visits this night.

"First off, I'm seein' little Laura Pasant an' claimin' some o' the kisses what ain't ever been nothin' but crosses on her letters," mused Bart. "Danged funny. I've kissed and hugged Jean Gregg often before she got this idea for me to collect college culture, but I can't recollect they ever tickled my toes like just seein' Laura's kisses on them crosses she was always makin' at the bottom of her letters."

Which may have proved that Bart had never heard the grass is greener across the pasture fence. Anyway, he was thinking how poor, little Laura, the country's best bronc-bustin' gal, had been trying to get herself some schooling to match his four years of college culture.

"Cussin' catymounts!" muttered Bart.

"I had ought've let Laura know them letters from me was doctored up by a professor feller an' made to sound pretty high an' mighty before they was mailed from that Eastern college town. Won't Laura be surprised an' tickled pink when she finds out I lit a shuck out'n that town after the first two months?"

FOR that was what Bart Layton had done. Two months had put blisters on his brain and the seat of his pants from squirming in chairs with a posterior long fitted to the saddle.

Then he had drifted pronto down Texas way. But first he had paid the professor in the college town to receive, doctor up, and mail his letters. Also to forward any and such mail as came. The professor was named Smith.

Never had one shock-haired, drawl-tongued puncher got himself into such a tangle. Give the devil his due, Bart hadn't wanted to bust any hearts. He had meant to let Jean Gregg down soft-like, after he had seen that college culture wasn't for him.

But somehow the time for the easy letdown never had come. In the meantime the friendly letters to and from Laura Pasant had turned into a few horses of other colors.

Until Bart Layton had awakened one morning, riding drag on a trail herd, to find that he had asked (per the professor) Laura Pasant to hitch up with him when he got back to Tamarack.

Furthermore and also, he had still neglected to inform Jean of the same. All of this per and through the professor who probably took his fun where he found it and didn't give a hoot how many gals Bart promised to marry, as long as Bart paid him one buck per revised and remailed letter.

All of which may have added up to Bart being one lowdown, sonuvagun. Crossing the thick dust of Tamarack, Bart only felt low. Also he was itchy down his back from the unusual long, black coat and city shirt with a flowing black tie. Clem Devers threw up his skinny hands.

As he came near the cabin, he dismounted and soft-footed ahead.

"It ain't—no—I knowed I took two swigs too many—not Bart Layton, even if folks has been intimatin' slanderous things—like you comin' home with a tail to your monicker in letters a foot high an' a yard long—how be yuh, Bart?"

That was bent, near-sighted Clem Devers, almost gagging over Bart's round hat and other gear.

"Never mind, Clem," said Bart. "I'm wantin' to hire a hoss—horse, at once to ride out to the Barrel-M to see Jean Gregg."

Clem Devers backed away from him, muttering, "Fust it's Jean Gregg traipses off an' ain't never been the same since. An' then it's Bart Layton comes prancin' home with a letter brand as high as a skunk's tail, an' Hank Marker ain't gonna like it."

"Whassat about Hank Marker, Clem?" snapped Bart who had heard.

"I ain't honin' fer trouble an' I'm stayin' out'n every ruckus," said Clem Devers. "Only it's been takin' fer granted Jean an' you had an understandin', Bart. But that ain't kept Hank Marker from ridin' the Barrel-M range. Hank ain't so hifalutin' as he once was, having gone nigh busted, an' Jean's got the finest graze in Tamarack since old Cyrus died."

Bart thought for a minute that a load had been lifted from his double loop-

ing heart. But all of a sudden he wasn't feeling as good as he had expected at having a fence opened to get rid of Jean Gregg.

Clem Devers produced a droop-eared roan with a mean eye. Then he brought out a double belt with holstered .45s. This belt was studded with brass peg-heads. The guns had butts with years of wear.

Bart started to wave the weapons away. But Clem pulled in his toothless lips and blew them out.

"Shucks, Bart!" he said. "Time was yuh'd tote yore ol' man's guns an' stack up as half the rooster he was. 'Sides, they'd been some talk, too 'bout some handwritin' yuh been doin' with the Pasant gal, an' them Pasant boys has turned out bad medicine, in case them lies I've been hearin' 'bout Laura Pasant an' you has reached the Pasants, which they has."

Bart took the gun belts and buckled them under his long, black coat. They felt awkward that way, but he still had hip callouses from the irons he had been wearing riding on the trail herd that had brought him most of the way back from Texas.

"Keep yore eye peeled for a ruckus, jest in case all them letters tacked onto yore monicker ain't made yuh smart enough to keep out'n dry-gulchin' traps," was Clem Devers' parting advice. "As I said, them Pasants is all-fired proddy, an' seein' Laura Pasant's made 'em spend dinero givin' her a year o' schoolin' to match up with yours, they ain't gonna like—"

Bart heeled the droop-eared roan into the street. The roan pulled a surprise at the first touch of steel. The droop ears flattened. His teeth ground on the bit.

Bart Layton was home. Also he was flying out of Tamarack on a horse that knew how to run. He could hear, faintly, Clem Devers' "hee-hee-hee," as the roan started his coat tails flying.

"SWING yore pardners, an' do-si-do!"

Bart was chanting the words of the dance call as he had the roan pulled down. It was an hour later, on the trail to the Pasant ranch.

"Dang my time if that ain't what I'm liable to be doin'," he opined to the roan's still flattened ears. "Jean is keepin' her word an' expecting I should keep mine. All the college culture I've collected has been at a dollar a shot from that professor writin' my mispellin' into fine words. An' the Pasant boys is out to take my hide, 'cause of me findin' out Laura an' not Jean has to be my kind."

The roan's ears suddenly stuck up straight. Moonlight failed to illuminate a black patch of pinon and sage at one side of the rocky cut of Crawling Creek through which Bart was riding, not thinking too much of what Clem Devers had tried to tell him.

"An' Laura Pasant's been gittin' some schoolin' so's to match up with the professor I'm supposed to be," continued Bart. "Now if'n it's so that Laura's off to school now, reckon I'd show hoss sense by swappin' ends an' headin' right back down Texas way—"

"Zee-rurr! Zee-rurr!"

The dirty lead from a pair of guns suddenly sounded like the buzzing of twin rattlesnakes. The roan jerked up his head, reared, and went over sideways with a squeal of death pain.

The bullet that got the horse had hit and whined off the hard bone between the ears. Even as he turned catlike and landed on his feet, Bart was downright convinced the pair of waiting gulchers hadn't been fooling.

As he flattened on the ground, pulling at his own old guns, Bart saw the riders rein out into the creek out where moonlight showed them.

"The hoss tossin' his head's all that kept lead out'n my gullet," said Bart through gritted teeth. "Maybe so the Pasants—"

He had the pair of ambushers fairly over his gunsights now. Their faces were blanked out by tied bandannas.

"That first shot done it, Mark!" growled one of the riders. "We ain't no time to fool, 'cause folks will be comin'

this way from the dance! He's cold meat, I'm tellin' yuh! Jean's waitin' an'—"

Bart recalled that Laura Pasant's older brother was named Mark.

Bart punctuated the confidence of the ambushing riders with twin jolts from both peacemakers. He had aimed as carefully as he could in the tricky moonlight. Result, lead burned the flank of one horse to bury itself under the seat of one rider's pants and lift him a foot from the saddle before the horse started on a fast run.

Bart's slug clipped the spur and boot-heel of the other ambusher and produced a wild oath of agony. The unexpected reprisal of the supposed dry-gulched corpse sent both riders lying low on their beasts' necks and high-tailing out of the cut.

Bart was about to send along another shock of lead poison for remembrance when he dropped his thumbs.

A THIRD rider wheeled into the moonlight, coming fast, and swerving into the path of the fleeing ambushers. Bart was so amazed that his pulse jumped and his breath struck in his throat.

Less than an hour before he had seen Jean Gregg in a swell dancing rig in the arms of Hank Marker back in Tamarack. Now he saw Jean again.

But she was no longer in a crisp, starched dress. A 'brero had been blown off her mass of dark hair. Her clear-featured face was outlined by the moonlight. She was a tall, wonderfully formed girl, but the deep saddle on a big white horse made her look tiny. She wore leather chaps.

Before Bart could call out or move, the running white horse with Jean in the saddle, appeared to join the beasts of the fleeing gulchers. Bart thought he heard the girl cry out something, but the hoof clatter drowned her words.

Then Bart was standing there in the creek cut, swearing soulfully. One ambusher had said; "Jean's waitin'—" Clem Devers had warned him of the Pasant boys who had heard of his writing to Laura Pasant.

"Sure as junipers, Jean would hear the same," reasoned Bart grimly. "An' it's said hell's a triflin' wind stacked up against the cyclone of a gal who thinks she's been handed the tarred end o' the rope."

Perhaps Hank Marker had identified him and informed Jean. Or the conductor of the mixed local might have talked, even if he had promised to keep Bart's return a secret.

"Anyway yuh round it up, Jean's got hold of the Pasant boys an' hooked up with them to give me my come-uppance on account of the writin me an' Laura Pasant has done," finally decided Bart. "Now I've a dead hoss to pay Clem Devers for, an' the nighest place I can shag to is the Pasant spread."

By this time, even if his conscience galled him, Bart was riled. He didn't see where the Pasants had to turn yellow gulchers if he wanted to hitch up with Laura, and had merely neglected the minor detail of calling off his promise to Jean Gregg.

Bart Layton saw bright lights in the big ranch house. It was well after midnight and he wondered; Maybe so the Pasant brothers, John and Mark, would be waiting up, expecting he might show up.

"Here's for it," muttered Bart clumping onto the wide porch.

He kept his thumbs close to his reloaded guns, but his black coat was over the irons. He had been doggoned well right. He saw the Pasant boys, tall and lanky, standing before a log fire.

Bart also saw Laura Pasant then. She was over to one side. Bart's innards went kind o' cold. He remembered little Laura as a nut-brown gal with corn-silk hair who could bust a bronc or down a calf and run an iron with the best topHands.

Now Bart had consulted a doctor and he had paid for a bleaching job on his own leathered face and hands. It seemed as if little Laura had seen the same skin doctor. Her small, oval face was as white as that of any eastern gal. Moreover, she was wearing a silk something or other that showed to advantage her

dainty figure and shapely, stockinged legs.

Even as Bart halted, pulled up as suddenly as a dallied steer, he saw little Laura fuss with a funny, high-topped hair-do, and then—what had always been a scandalous act in Tamarack, she was painting her lips with some kind of fancy red stuff.

"Tell yuh, Laura, yuh're a plumb fool for waitin', 'cause he won't be ridin' thisaway tonight!"

That was the harsh voice of the tall, bony Mark Pasant. Bart swore under his breath. Mark ought to know. Hadn't he and his brother tried to gun Bart out? And didn't they know they'd shot his hoss from under his pants?

"Wrong guess!" rasped Bart suddenly, kicking the partly opened door the rest of the way. "'Lo, Laura, honey. Reckon yore yeller scalawag brothers is downright mistaken. 'Sides bein' lowdown gulchers, they're owin' Clem Devers for a hoss they drilled."

LAURA Pasant was on her feet staring at Bart. For the first time Bart noticed how white her hands had turned. She was fluttering a small handkerchief in her fingers, applying it to her mouth as if she were about to keel over.

"Bart—Professor Layton?"

As she greeted him, Laura was standing stiffly straight-backed, surveying his store clothes, his slicked hair and the round hat in his hand, and his face which had all the appearance of four years of indoors and the east.

"Sure 'nough, Laura," laughed Bart shortly, keeping an eye cocked upon Mark and the other brother. "But I'm opinin' that for the present we can leave off the professor monicker. I ain't wantin' nary ruckus, but I'm still sayin' one of you long-eared sidewinders is payin' for that 'ere hoss yuh shot."

He was looking into Laura's blue eyes. They were not as soft and shylike as he had remembered. They were definitely fixed and hard.

"Professor Layton!" Laura's voice was crisply enunciating each syllable. "Is it necessary to lapse into the crude provincialism of your past? And aren't you somewhat unbalanced, walking into our home and accusing my brothers, Mark and John, of some misdeed which they could not possibly have committed?"

If that bullet had missed the roan's bony head and split his own breastbone, Bart couldn't have been robbed of breath and words more completely. He recovered to stammer badly.

"But Laura, honey—yuh ain't thinkin' I wasn't throwin' a straight loop in our writin', are yuh? Why, I—good glory! Where'd yuh learn yoreself to sling that hifalutin' lingo? 'Sides, I heard your brother Mark named when them sidewinders poured lead—"

BART seldom lost his head. But he had about as much control over himself now as a tumble weed in a sandstorm. Laura Pasant had certainly tried to live up to his college culture, as evidently expressed by that Professor Smith at one buck per letter.

Bart had no time to con this over. The lanky, sad-faced brothers were coming for him. Neither one showed hardware, having laid off their coats and belts. But they had long arms and they were smartly separating to provide Bart with two fighting fronts.

Bart had his guns under the black coat. Little good they were against two unarmed men. Even if the Pasants showed in their eyes an implacable determination to take him apart.

"Professor Layton, indeed!" That was Laura's scornful voice. "Just a two-timing imposter, who thinks he can carry on a secondhand romance in elegant language that will deceive a dumb, little ranch girl. And all the time he has been nothing more than a—a tick-ridden saddle-bum with a thick tongue!"

There were limitations even to Bart's loosely assembled conscience. He might have been a saddle-bum, but he wasn't tick-ridden. Besides, he had no more time for listening to the surprising Laura.

Mark and John were two-to-one, but

Leaning over the shelf of rock, Layton saw Quarles on the ledge below.

they had approached warily. And Bart suddenly had Mark between him and the open fireplace. Bart sidestepped abruptly, dropped his round hat, and dived with reaching hands that had bulldogged many a fractious steer.

John Pasant roared, and went for him from the side, but Bart hit Mark under his reaching hands. One shoulder cracked Mark's bony knees and Bart's fist crashed into his lean stomach.

Together Bart and Mark rolled, hur-

tling over. Mark howled suddenly, his lightly fleshed hunkers having landed upon the hottest end of a smoking pine log. Mark's end of the ruckus was ended for the time.

But fingers like claws dug into the back of Bart's neck. That was John. And John's hard knees almost cracked Bart's spine. Bart groaned but managed to twist, reach up, and hook one rawhide arm behind John's neck.

John's lanky figure somersaulted. The unlucky Mark had been beating at the rear of his pants where the cloth still smoked when John collided with him head-on. Bart came up, ready to swing again, and a stick of firewood cracked across the back of his skull.

Bart didn't go out, but he sat down hard. He knew Laura had hit him.

"I dislike stopping what you have coming, Bart," said the hard voice of Laura Pasant. "But I have been thinking some. Mark, you and John wait a minute. Someone did shoot your horse, Bart? You thought it was my brothers?"

Bart stared at Laura. There was still no warmness in her blue eyes. Only evidence of questioning shrewdness.

"Sure 'nough, Laura," said Bart, considerably chastened himself by now.

"An' one masked gulcher called the other Mark, that's why—"

Mark Pasant was swearing, showing signs of wanting to fight it out. But the younger John Pasant put out a hand.

"Wait, Mark," he said. "Sis, we ain't gulched nobody, 'cause we rode straight home with you from Tamarack two hours ago as soon as the train conductor said Bart Layton had come back. But Bart wouldn't be shaggin' out here an' leavin' his hoss unless the same had been salivated. Maybe we ought've done the gulchin', only we didn't."

BART stopped. He had plenty of trouble on hand without dragging Jean Gregg into this. Come to think of it, the amazing evolution of Laura Pasant now came to him as somewhat of a relief.

After all, Jean and he had been kids together. If she hadn't come back from the East with high and mighty ideas about his taking on college culture, he wouldn't have wanted a finer girl than Jean.

But a slight taste of the East had made him too sick. If that was the kind of life Jean wanted, he had wisely judged they would never be happy. No. Hard-riding, bronc-busting Laura Pasant was a better bet for a waddy who had his own home ranch.

And now look what his fooling around had done to poor Laura Pasant.

Laura Pasant came up with an answer unexpectedly.

"Why, Hank Marker is always called *Mark*," she said. "And I saw him leaving the Tamarack dance hall, with Quarles, his tough ranch foreman. I guess Jean Gregg heard about you being home, Bart, seeing that all the others at the dance were told about it by the trainman."

Bart was feeling suddenly lower than a snake's belly. Here was Laura who had every right to call upon her brothers to bust him wide open. And now she was trying to be friendly and set him straight.

He bet she'd been putting on a show with all of that fine lingo. That still left him holding two bears by the tails.

"But yuh think, Laura, yuh mean that Jean would have prodded Hank Marker into a dry-gulchin'?" asked Bart. "That ain't like Jean."

"Wouldn't hold it against her if she had," said Laura crisply. "But Jean ain't—isn't that kind, Bart Layton, and you know it. Moreover, Jean's been trying to dodge that old Hank Marker. Why, she's still crazy enough to think you're worth hitching up with, an' she's told Hank Marker that, even knowing about the letters you've been having written to me."

"Laura, look at the meanest, orneriest saddle-bum—"

"If I were you, Bart, I'd borrow one of our horses and I'd do my best to fix up the fences with Jean," said Laura quietly. "When you've done that, you

might return the horse, and we'll talk things over."

There had been promise in the written crosses that meant kisses. There seemed some promise in Laura's blue eyes now, but it was a knowing sort of look, not at all what an hombre would expect of a gal with a busted heart.

Bart didn't like it. He didn't like the empty sensation he had a half minute later when Mark Pasant drawled out a suggestion.

"Yuh oughter be tarred an' feathered, Bart," said Mark. "But seein' as how yuh did get dry-gulched, I'd go lookin' for Hank Marker. An' I wouldn't waste time neither. I've heered him say he'd have Jean Gregg one way or another, if he had to ride off with her."

Bart was doing some thinking. Jean had seen the attempted gulching. Yet she had ridden off with the two masked men. But had she gone willingly? Bart recalled she had cried out something.

"I'm borrowin' a hoss an' rig," said Bart. "I'm ridin' to the Barrel-M pronto. When this 'ere ruckus is ironed out, I'll be talkin' with you, Laura."

A lot of wisdom that hadn't come from schooling showed in Laura's eyes and voice.

"I wouldn't ride to the Barrel-M first, Bart," she advised. "Hank Marker has a hunting shack only a few folks know about. It's at the head of Crawling Creek, in a hidden canyon. I'm one of the few that knows."

"Marker wouldn't be loco enough to run that kind o' ranny!" exclaimed Bart.

"Wouldn't he though?" said little Laura wisely. "I'm one of the three or four that knows about that cabin. The others daren't talk. But I've always carried pop's two-shot derringer on long rides. That's why I saw the Hank Marker cabin and I can talk about it. Hank wouldn't like to have got himself belly shot."

"You mean, that Hank Marker ain't no more sense—?"

"I'd ride fast and hard for the hidden canyon to the left of the Bear Ridge fork of Crawling Creek, Bart, if I was still thinking the way I think you're thinking of Jean," said Laura calmly.

BART LAYTON left his horse and soft-footed toward the shadow of the cabin in the little canyon. No light showed. No sound came to him at first.

"I'm hopin' it's a wild goose chase," he muttered.

The thin cry that came to him broke off his words and his hope. It came from the shadowy cabin set on a rocky shelf. Just then Bart caught the outline of a perched figure on a rock above the cabin.

The sentry must be Quarles, long the crooked foreman of the Hank Marker spread. In its day the Marker range had harbored more wet than dry cattle. A sudden clamping down of a Cattle Association patrol had been largely responsible for Marker being nigh busted, the way Bart had gathered from some of Jean's letters forwarded to him from the college where he was not absorbing culture.

Bart's veins pulsed with icy rage. He heard Quarles' low laugh as the thin cry of a girl was repeated from the cabin below. Bart tried to keep out of his mind what might be happening down there.

Laura Pasant, in her quick swapping of hifalutin' words and scorn for common sense and sympathy for the other girl, had hinted at what might be expected of Hank Marker. Bart tightened his grip on one worn gun butt.

Laura had said she could talk because she was one of the few who had toted a deadly derringer. But Jean would be helpless. Moreover, Bart now could accept full responsibility for Jean's plight.

"Of all the dumb waddies, I'm the dumbest," whispered Bart. "I might-a knowed Jean wouldn't have been a party to that gulchin'. But it was funny, with all her scornin' the range when she came back from the east, that she was wearin' chaps an' a 'brero."

Then words shaped themselves in a

(Continued on page 76)

Illustrated by Newton H. Alfred

Saddle Bum

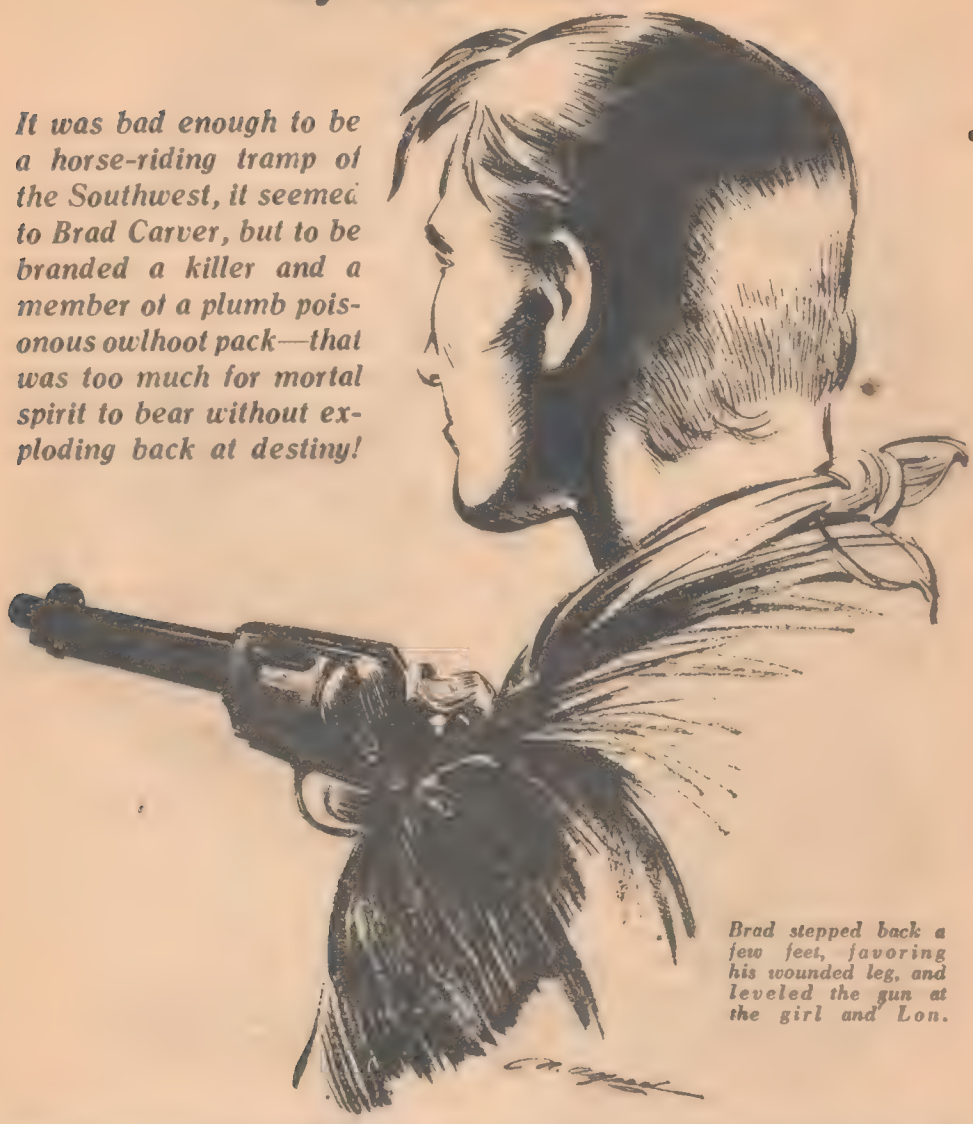
BRAD CARVER never would have believed the sweetest, the most prideful, girl on Santos Range could have the spunk to do what she did. Or that she would have anything to do with him, a saddle bum, a hunted fugitive, wanted for murder. But that was the way of it this rainy night.

Just before midnight Brad Carver crawled through the rain to the thorn-cactus corral. A bullet gouge under his kneecap had lamed him. He was a little out of his mind. Two days and nights being hunted in the desert arroyos had done that to him.

"If only they had given a hombre a

By JOE McCOY

It was bad enough to be a horse-riding tramp of the Southwest, it seemed to Brad Carver, but to be branded a killer and a member of a plumb poisonous owlhoot pack—that was too much for mortal spirit to bear without exploding back at destiny!



Brad stepped back a few feet, favoring his wounded leg, and leveled the gun at the girl and Lon.

chance to palaver!" he muttered, watching a lighted lamp in the kitchen in the ranchhouse. "It's what comes of a locoed saddle bum trying to play a lone hand. Maybe Miss Jennie might make 'em wait, if she knew the downright truth."

No one was moving in the lean-to kitchen of the Bar-L. It was an ell of the rambling 'dobe house, one of the oldest on the Santos.

"I done old Ling a good turn when the foreman was about to hide him with a blacksnake," whispered Brad hoarsely. "Reckon that me hornin' in an' knockin' Ches Norton on his hunkers only readied me up for the rope, Norton bein' killed. If only them owlhoots hadn't piled me on my ear, leavin' me cold for Lon Parker to find."

Brad bellied along the cactus fence. Lacking his .45 he had not been able to kick over a rabbit or a setting quail during two days of blistering sunshine and freezing nights. This rain had allayed his thirst.

But that could not take up the slack

in his lean body. Old Ling wouldn't forget he had saved him from a hiding for spilling soup on Foreman Norton's neck. Norton, who had gone to his death forty-eight hours ago in the rustling stampede; who had been buried under tons of mud and rock by the dynamiting of the Bar-L reserve pond dam to cover the night raid and the outlaw drive of the prime market herd through the canyon into the badland bordering the Rio.

The quickly formed posse, headed by Lon Parker, the nighest neighboring rancher to the Blanding's Bar-L, had caught Brad cold. Lead had broken his horse's foreleg. The fall had piled Brad upon his head.

LON Parker, big and good-natured, the friend of everybody on Santos range, had been mistaken. But Brad couldn't hold that against him. When that sudden night stampede had started, and the pond dam had been blasted, Brad had taken out after the tail of the herd.

He had been alone on the left wing of the herd. Seeing the sudden shadows of raiding outlaws, he had fired a few shots at random to summon help. Then he hadn't waited. He had been right close to a pair of owlhooter stampeders.

Thinking he might gun them down, or at least turn the panicked steer leaders away from the nearby canyon, Brad had gone after them, alone and shooting. Just then he had heard the blowing up of the dam at the head of the canyon. His trail-worn grulla had been shot from under him.

What had happened after that, Brad had not known. Not until he was tied on a horse. And he had heard Lon Parker say he had seen him with the outlaws. That Foreman Norton, of the Bar-L, had been shot plumb off his horse by Brad or one of his outlaw friends. That Norton had fallen directly in front of the cow stampede.

And then there had been only Foreman Norton's horse and his crushed hat, found at the edge of the mud and rocks swept into the canyon by the dynamited flood. Which spelled murder to the grim-eyed cowmen who had been hastily assembled by Lon Parker.

Brad was through the rainy muck of the yard now. Under the lean-to kitchen window he listened but heard no sound. He pulled himself up. A beef-bone roast and cold biscuits set out on a table made Brad sick, he was that starved.

The posse he had escaped by a mad break, still tied to the horse, might be along at any time. The rain had helped him on this dodge.

"'Tain't seemin' though they'd think I'm loco enough to double back for the home ranch," thought Brad, his ears keened, and his mouth watering at the sight of the roast only a few feet away. "Gosh an' glory, if'n I could only just get to Miss Jennie long enough to try tellin' her the straight o' it! Lon Parker ain't the kind to argufy ag'in the truth. He seen me in the dark, an' it looked a'mighty bad, me bein' a saddle bum, an' ridin' for Miss Jennie only my first month."

Over in the rain the punchers' bunkhouse was dark and silent. Most of the riders likely had joined the posse hunting him, thought Brad. Like as not there would be no one about but Miss Jennie herself, and old Ling the cook.

If he could only loop that hunk of beef and the biscuits!

"Tarnation! Put that under my belt, an' I could borrow a beast from the home cavvy," whispered Brad. "Reckon Miss Jennie wouldn't be takin' my word ag'in Lon Parker at that. Nary doubt they're sweet on each other, an' fixin' to hitch the Bar-L an' his Circle-Q."

Screeching of the window as he raised it was covered some by the pelting rain. Brad guessed old Ling had gone to bed. He had probably left the beef and biscuits out for such of the possemen as might happen back to the home ranch.

Brad, keeping low, almost reached the table. He was set for a quick grab of the beef, then for high-tailing it back out of the window. An inside door leading into the lean-to creaked suddenly.

The two horses met shoulder to shoulder with violent impact that knocked Brad off his mount into the mud.

BRAD had just time to drop and roll quietly into the shadows close to the cookstove and the wood box. If it happened to be old Ling coming in, he would be all right, he surmised.

Later, he might loop a chance to try explaining to Miss Jennie, Lon Parker's market beef had been bedded with the Bar-L cows before the stampede. Parker himself had been with his riders. That was how he had come to spot Brad nigh to the place where it was evident Foreman Ches Norton must have ridden to his death and dam-blast burial.

Brad was grateful for the warmth of the cooling cookstove, but only for a moment. Then his skin felt as if he were covered with melting snowflakes. Often, during his few weeks of riding for Miss Jennie Blanding, the beautiful, red-headed little queen of the Bar-L, Brad had admired her from a distance.

Not much given to women critters was Brad. But Miss Jennie was the daintiest and loveliest, and at the same time the most prideful riding gal Brad had ever seen.

So to see her suddenly now was a shock.

Her lithe figure moved between Brad and the turned-down lamp. She was as perfectly silhouetted against the light as a finely drawn etching.

Miss Jennie was having a midnight snack of beef and biscuit for herself. Brad was wishing he could somehow make himself invisible and fade away.

"Nary gal would ever believe the truth after a hombre's seen her in such sneakin', polecat fashion," he thought.

Then he unconsciously tried to ease his wounded leg. It knocked a stick of wood from the stove box. Miss Jennie whirled, her pretty face white against the halo of her let-down red hair.

"Who is it? Ling?"

Brad could only try to get to his feet. His gouged leg gave way and he sagged over toward the stove. The girl's small, tanned hand was pressed against her teeth to stop a scream.

It had to be then that loping horses made sloppy splashes in the mud of the ranch yard out by the corral. Men's voices came harshly, swearing. Brad knew some of the possemen had returned.

"Please, Miss Jennie—it ain't what you think—I'm excusin' my bein' here, an'—" Brad got no farther.

For the girl's lithe figure was around the table. She was moving toward the still half-open window. With forty-eight hours of hunger and desperation, and the certain knowledge that, if caught, he might dance at a rope's end before any law could intervene, Brad acted upon mad impulse.

Diving from his unwounded leg, he threw himself forward, his hands catching Miss Jennie's ankles. That brought the girl down before she could reach the window or scream. Brad was too desperate to notice that Miss Jennie did not cry out. He had but one thought.

He must keep Jennie quiet until he could slip out another door into the darkness. That would give him only a slim chance, but he had to take it.

Jennie surprised him by remaining perfectly still. The way both had fallen, he could see her dark eyes glowing, looking at him. As a man will, driven to the limit, Brad spoke. He told her softly:

"I didn't kill Ches Norton, ma'am—I didn't see him—excuse me—I gotta try lightin' a shuck out—you see—"

Suddenly he was aware that the touch of her had somehow weakened him, loosened his arms. He cursed under his breath. He hadn't meant to do this. Let the possemen take him—

He rolled over. Miss Jennie moved only her eyes. They followed him. Then she started to cry out, and madness overcame him and he lunged, clamping one strong hand over her mouth.

If the cookstove had fallen upon his skull, he could not have been kicked out quicker or colder.

BRAD CARVER was aware of a pounding that seemed to vibrate inside his skull. He moved painfully, heard himself groaning. The pounding continued, and he realized it came from a knuckled fist upon a door.

Half conscious, Brad started mumbling, trying to reply. His half-numb senses made him believe old Ling must be trying to get him up.

He must have overslept and old Ling had come to the bunkhouse after him.

"Yeah, Ling, yeah—"

A small, firm hand went over his mumbling mouth. Miss Jennie's voice whispered, her lips almost touching his ear.

"Keep quiet, Brad—quiet," she said. "Let me talk—don't move or speak—"

"Jennie? You awake? Hell's bells, Jennie! Don't tell me you've been sleepin' through all this ruckus? Jennie! It's Lon! You all right?"

Lon Parker? Pounding at a door? Where was he? Brad's aching brain juggled with the situation here in the blank darkness.

"Yes—Lon?" The voice of Miss Jennie was slow and sleepy. "What is it—Lon? Goodness sakes! Stop hammerin'—I hear you. What do you want? Oh!"

The girl's warm hand pressed tighter upon Brad's mouth as her little exclamation appeared to indicate she had come fully awake now.

Then as Lon Parker quit knocking, Miss Jennie spoke again.

"For heaven's sakes, Lon! Have you caught the killer, or why roust me out at this unearthly hour?" She stared.

"Jennie! I've got to see you!" Lon Parker's tone was hard. "We trailed Brad Carver right to the ranchhouse yard! He'd busted into your kitchen an' stole some grub! Old Ling says he hit him with a stick of wood, but that Brad kicked his stomach an' got clean away! We can't pick up nary sign o' him in the rain! Jennie! Lemme in!"

Funny how loco a hunted man's mind will become. Trapped, making more certain his quick demise by being here with

A sweeping right to the whiskers knocked his opponent backward.

Miss Jennie, Brad for several seconds was not thinking of what seemed must be his inevitable end.

Lon Parker spoke as if he had been in the habit of coming here.

Yet he was madder than he had ever been before at Miss Jennie's cool reply.

"Not now, Lon, please! I was up until late! I'm tired! If the killer got away an' Ling ain't hurt, ride back to breakfast in the morning, and tell me about it. Goodnight!"

BRAD did not move then. He found he was lying on a blanket that had been spread upon the floor. To keep her hand firmly upon his lips, Miss Jennie had to lean close to him.

Again she whispered.

"Brad? Don't speak—can you understand—? You must be quiet—they'll go away—"

But Lon Parker was not satisfied.

He was not going away.

"I'll take care o' this," Brad heard Lon Parker say to men with him. "Go on downstairs an' rest up in the bunkhouse. We'll maybe pick up the killer's sign after daybreak."

"Brad—don't move — don't speak — everything will be all right—Ling hit you—remember—I wouldn't have turned you in."

Again Lon Parker pounded the door. This time he was emphatic.

"You ain't safe stayin' in there alone!" said Parker angrily. "Carver's nothing but a saddle bum. He was sent in by them owlhooters who ran off your market herd an' a passel o' my cows! He must've known Ches Norton was onto him, an' he drilled him an' threw him into the canyon where he was buried! He's desperate! Now, Jennie! We have things to talk over now!"

Brad whispered, "Maybe so I can make it out the window. I'll high-tail for—"

"Shut up," commanded the girl almost fiercely. "You're safe if you keep still—if you—"

"I ain't waitin', Jennie! I'm comin' in now. The men's gone an' I sent old Ling out to help take care o' the saddle stock!"

"Good gracious, Lon!" To Brad's amazement, Miss Jennie's tone suddenly changed to assent. "If it's that important—wait! I'll—"

Lon must have crashed the door with a burly shoulder. Brad heard it smash open in the darkness. A dim light showed the big rancher. It also showed Miss Jennie who had sprung lightly to her feet and was standing near the door.

The light showed Brad, too, that he was on a blanket back of the wide bed, away from the opening door. A slight breeze blew through a curtained window above him. As he lay, he was invisible to Lon Parker.

"Well, I must say you are taking a great deal for granted," said Miss Jennie quietly, coldly. "There's nothing that couldn't wait until morning, Lon. If the men hunting Brad find out you're here, how do you think it'll look to them?"

Once more Brad was in position to see the sweet figure of the girl. Evidently, as loco as it seemed, he had been brought here by Miss Jennie and Old Ling, while possemen, in a lynching mood had trailed him into the ranchhouse kitchen.

Lon Parker was a big man, nearly always laughing. But the rancher-neighbor to Miss Jennie wasn't laughing now.

"Where is he?" demanded Lon, kicking the door shut behind him. "You helped that skunk Carver get away, an' he's hid in some of the buildings. I ain't talking, naturally, but Sis is mournin' Ches Norton an' I'm bringin' his killer to the rope if it's the last thing I ever do. Carver didn't leave the Bar-L. We want him."

Brad had met Sis Parker. And from what he knew of her, he didn't like her.

"Lon, you're a fool—"

The girl uttered a little cry with her words.

"Go away, Lon! Go away! You want all Santos range to think—?"

Her cry was choked off. Brad's fingernails bit into his palms. He was unarmed, weak. His head was spinning. His arms and legs felt as heavy as lead.

"You wouldn't hitch up with me, huh?" cut in Lon Parker. "You know what folks think, an' you'll let 'em scorn me. You bet I want all Santos range to know, an' in a little while, *Miss Uppity Blanding.* If'n I ain't good enough for you, you'll find out they won't anybody be thinkin' you're high and mighty enough to face Santos."

IN the darkness, Brad could only picture a dainty Miss Jennie who had risked everything to give him a chance. Why? He could but guess about that. But right now the genial Parker, whose name was known throughout the range, was showing another side to his nature—not a pleasant side at all.

And Brad, long a lone-riding saddle bum, realized that the girl was fighting against the brute strength of big Lon Parker for but one reason.

For her to cry out for help would mean that Brad must be discovered and dragged away.

"Maybe so you was sweet on the saddle bum what turns out to be a killer!" Lon's words were venomous. "You was firin' Ches Norton come the end o' the month. Carver slapped Norton down on account o' your Chink cook. An' suddenly you said you wouldn't marry me. Maybe so Norton had a reason to brag about his connections with you, an' Sis plannin' to hitch up with him! So they was Carver, too!"

Brad was breathing deeply, pulling strength into his muscles. He heard Miss Jennie suddenly seem to cease struggling. What she said, low-voiced and tense, acted like a double swig of redeye whisky upon Brad.

"Now, Lon—you know well enough Norton's foul tongue when he was liquored—as for Carver who killed him, I hardly ever spoke to him. He was a no-good saddle bum. But wait, Lon. Please. If I promise to marry you—"

Lon's harsh laugh brought Brad to his hands and knees. But the floor whirled under him. His dizzied brain was not yet steadied.

"Marry me, honey?" Lon's laugh was cut off. "Well, then why wait? I'm crazy about you, Jennie. In a little while, I'll go. But now—promise me definitely, honey."

Brad had managed to get to one knee. In the darkness he could only guess that Miss Jennie was between him and big Lon Parker. He started slowly, working his way toward them.

If he could but reach Lon, get a hand on the rancher's gun? He was unprepared then for Miss Jennie's low breathed words. If he had not been where he was, had still been lying on the floor, he would have missed her murmur.

Plainly Miss Jennie meant that he should not hear.

"Yes, Lon," she said. "If you'll promise to leave—if the others don't know about our plans to be married just yet—"

Brad could hear Lon's low exclamation. It fixed Lon's position. The rancher's heavy gun belt thudded suddenly to the floor. Brad went completely loco then. It was incredible, but he was compelled to believe that Miss Jennie was giving her promise only because she believed him to be lying wounded and helpless on the floor.

"An' I thought I knew somethin' about gals," was Brad's whisper as he scooped Lon's gun belt up, had the bone-handled .45 in his hand, and tried desperately to make out the rancher's head where he had Miss Jennie held tightly in his arms.

FINDING it impossible to strike without the chance of hitting Miss Jennie, Brad stepped back a few feet, favoring his wounded leg.

"Parker!" Brad spoke low but with a lash in his voice. "On your toes! I ain't drillin' even a buzzard in the back!"

Lon Parker swore. For the first time Miss Jennie seemed to lose the heroic calmness that had controlled her voice and actions.

"Brad! Don't shoot—don't kill—there's something—"

Lon roared and lunged. Brad struck out with the heavy barrel of the .45 but knew

he had missed when a smashing fist jammed into his mouth and sent him down. Lon's heavy arm shot out again as he threw his full weight upon Brad.

Brad had the muzzle of the gun buried in Lon somewhere about his stomach. He could have thumbed or pulled the trigger. According to his code, Lon Parker, a low-down coyote for all of his standing on Santos range, deserved to die.

But with Lon's bulky arm choking him and a fist again hammering into his face, Brad kept one dominant thought. Here in this dark room was the girl who had tried to save him by a play that not one woman in ten million would have made.

As Lon's knuckles blinded him, Brad repeated inside his mind the girl's words—

"Don't shoot—don't kill—there's something—"

And the way Miss Jennie had called him "Brad" was something too. But that failed to bring strength to bruised, starved muscles. Lon Parker was wickedly intent upon killing him. In his murderous intent, Lon had uttered no alarm to bring others.

Brad's hand holding the gun was suddenly jerked away. Blackness was settling upon him when he heard the crunching blow. He lay still, unable to move under the suddenly limp weight of Lon Parker.

Miss Jennie rolled the unconscious rancher to one side. Brad breathed more freely. Now that this was over, he knew he must get away pronto. In his mind was that Miss Jennie had meant to marry this coyote to save him.

"Miss Jennie—ma'am—I'd admire to —I mean—"

Brad couldn't find the words he wanted. Suddenly he had no need for words..

"Brad, I suppose I'm as loco as ever a redhead was made, even if I try to live up to being boss of the Bar-L," the girl was saying. "Would it mean anything to you to know I might have hitched up with Lon Parker if you hadn't come ridin'—?" I mean, why can't a gal have her say-so when she meets up with the right hombre?"

All at once Brad was not too helpless to get his arms around Miss Jennie. Once more her mouth was close, but this time it met his lips in a kiss that dizzied him more than the blows of Lon's hard fists.

"I don't want you to think, Brad, that I—"

"I ain't tryin' to think, Miss Jennie, ma'am—"

Her voice was cool again, but it warmed Brad now. He was thinking that Miss Jennie had tried to tell him something when he might have drilled Lon Parker. He had far enough recovered to help Miss Jennie tie up Lon and gag him.

"You told me not to shoot him," said Brad at last. "That there was something, Miss Jennie."

"Honey, after what's just happened, couldn't you at least drop the 'Miss Jennie'?" she said. "Yes, there's something, Brad. Do you remember whether Ches Norton saw Lon Parker during the two hours before the pond dam was blown up and Norton was killed?"

Brad could reply to that quickly enough.

"I didn't see Ches Norton any time after sunset, Miss—honey," said Brad. "And Lon Parker was with me and some of the boys on the herd bedding ground right up to the time the shooting started and the cows stampeded. I took out after two rustlers alone then, and I saw the herd panicked into the canyon and lost before I was shot offen my hoss."

"Then if Lon Parker saw you fall an' knew to steer the posse to the spot, he didn't have time to palaver any with Norton, did he?" said Miss Jennie.

"Nope," recalled Brad. "An' I heard Lon tellin the other possemen he hadn't figured Ches Norton was on to the beddin' field until he seen me with the outlaws and Norton was shot down in front of the stampede."

MISS JENNIE had lighted an oil lamp, turned it low. She surveyed Brad's blood-drenched figure. She went over and pulled a cord leading downstairs.

A minute later wondering old Ling appeared.

The face of old Ling remained as calm as a study in yellow oil. He looked at the unconscious, bound Lon Parker.

"Ling, bring hot coffee and soup pronto," ordered Miss Jennie. "Brad has to eat while I'm bindin' up his wound. An' then, Ling, snake a beast out of the back corral and have it down by the creek ford for Brad."

"Missee Jenn grows wise if not old," said old Ling quietly, and scuttled away.

"Brad, you have a chore to do," said Miss Jennie. "I recollect that Sis Parker came ridin' to Bar-L too many times after you were hired by Norton. Not bein' mean-mouthed about it, but Sis had a way with every likely hombre that come along. Could-a been so with you, Brad, but I hope not."

"Reckon it could-a been," ventured Brad cautiously, thumbing the cylinder of Lon Parker's .45. "What's on your mind, Miss Jenn—honey? You said there was somethin'—?"

"Never mind that, Brad," said Miss Jennie. "I opine Sis Parker is at the home ranch alone, seein' all of Lon's riders are out. I'm thinkin' she'd gladly give shelter, maybe hide out a puncher wanted for murder. If you'd drift your hoss, make out you're needin' help, you'll have Sis Parker takin' a chance."

"Nope, I ain't havin' any, Miss—honey," said Brad. "Bein' hid out by Sis Parker might bring on downright complications."

"I don't like it myself, Brad, but for this time I'll forget it," said Miss Jennie. "I'm wantin' you should round up Sis Parker any way you find handiest, an' bring her here to me pronto. Before daylight if possible. An' look out, Brad honey, that some hombre don't dry-gulch you on the way."

Brad nodded but scowled.

"Yeah, Miss—honey, I'll try the same," he said. "But I can't just ride off an' leave you with Lon."

"I'm seein' Lon Parker makes good his boast," said Miss Jennie. "He's passin' the time right here in this room, as he wanted. But old Ling will play chaperone with a stick of stove wood in case Lon could get himself free."

Brad kissed her, and went through the window. He got to the ground, feeling strong enough now to fight the world, with food and coffee under his belt.

SIS PARKER was a little, dark-haired girl. She never overlooked any new rider coming to Santos range. She had green eyes and she had tried them out on Brad. But, Brad was thinking, they'd never mean anything to him any more.

Again he was in the drenching rain. He had expected to make a try at finding Sis Parker's room to awaken her. To his surprise, the green-eyed little girl was in the old-fashioned "setting room" before a log blaze.

Brad had a new loyalty. But all the same he breathed more quickly as he saw Sis stretched out in an old Morris chair. He could see she had been asleep. She appeared to be waiting, listening for the return of her brother and the riders.

If any hands were at home, they were asleep in the bunkhouse some distance away. Instead of startling the girl by trying the window, Brad went directly to the door leading into the fire-lit room. He found the latch string out.

"Reckon she ain't feerin' nary saddle tramp, even if he is wanted for killin'," mused Brad.

He had Lon Parker's gun hidden under his ragged shirt now. Just tripping the latch, he suddenly put his weight against the door. He heard Sis cry out as he fell inside the room and lay still on the floor.

Apparently Brad was out cold. He kept his eyes closed to slits. His hand was convenient to the .45 in case there should be one of the men about. It seemed he was in luck.

"Brad Carver!" Sis Parker breathed his name, crossing to him.

Then she was bending over him, her hand coming close to the gun as she felt for his heart. His half-lidded vision saw

a little smile on Sis Parker's ripe lips.

Brad remained motionless as Sis got up and ran across the room. She came back from the kitchen with a brandy bottle. Brad gagged on the liquor, but it felt good going down his throat.

He could see that Sis, still bending over him, was listening, watching the window. It was apparent she did not wish to be caught by her brother or others.

"Brad?" She was talking low, as he permitted his eyelids to flutter and breathed deeply. "Can you hear me, Brad? You must wake up—you can't stay here."

Brad made out to groan and open his eyes. He gasped.

"Sis! How—yes, I recollect—Sis! You gotta help me—"

Her way of helping was immediate if not what he intended. She bent her head. Her warm lips reached his in a kiss. Her soft arms pillowed his head.

Brad had his loyalty, but he also had his orders. He feigned half consciousness as his arms went around the girl. She freed herself quickly.

"Please, Brad—wait—can you walk? I'll hide you, darling—come back this way—be quiet, Brad—"

HER pretty face was lifted. Her green eyes were shining. Brad murmured, getting to his feet.

"Got to sleep, Sis—ain't had no rest for two nights—"

"A'right, Brad," she said. "Even if Lon gets back, you'll be safe in my room until I can sneak you out."

There was a moment when Sis's clinging arms and nearness almost got him. Then he thought he heard someone moving in the rain outside. He also noted that an outside door opened from Sis's room into the darkness.

Brad thrust the girl from him roughly. He issued a quick command.

"Climb into a coat, Sis! You're ridin' with me! I'll need you if your fool brother an' his locoed possemen catch my sign!"

"Why, you lowdown—!"

Sis's lingo was blue around the edges. She sprang across the room. Before Brad realized her intention, she had a small, shining gun in her hand. It exploded as he jumped toward her, weaving to one side.

He had no choice but to slam his fist under her jaw. He picked her up as she fell.

It was tough going to his tied horse. He hefted Sis across the saddle, starting to mount behind her. A gun exploded from the darkness. Brad felt as if the top of his skull had been lifted off. He started falling, but managed to hook his arm in the stirrup strap.

The Bar-L horse broke away, squealing, evidently stung by the same bullet that had creased Brad's head. Two more shots cracked, but the lead missed. Brad got one hand upon the saddle horn and the impetus of the running horse pulled him up.

For a moment he heard nothing. He held the limp girl across his knees, riding in the rainy darkness. The sound of another horse then broke upon his ears. His pursuer was making better time than his own overburdened horse.

Brad was half tempted to stop and drop Sis Parker into the mud. But Miss Jennie had said she wanted Sis brought to her. Brad bent low as the other horse came up fast.

"Damnation!" he muttered. "I ain't wantin' to drill none o' the Parker's riders! But I gotta do somethin'!"

The darkness favored him in what came to his mind. The other rider was apparently waiting until close enough for a sure killing. They were in a narrow trail now. Brad knew they had crossed the state line onto the Bar-L. The ranch house was less than half a mile away. The pursuer was within a few yards as Brad rounded a shoulder of rock.

"If I gun him, I'll bring the whole posse rippin' down onto me," muttered Brad. "An' with me right plain abductin' Sis Parker, they'd hang me first an' palaver afterward."

With the other horse pounding up to the shoulder turn, Brad slipped Sis to the ground as easily as possible. He whirled

his own beast, crouched, and fed him the spurs. The two horses met shoulder to shoulder with violent impact that bucked Brad off and into the soft mud.

He had only time to see that the pursuing Parker rider rolled and lay still. Brad left the huddled figure there. Both horses were gone, panicked by their collision. Brad groaned with the effort, but got Sis's light body over one shoulder.

LUKE JAMES, one of Lon Parker's toughest riders, confronted Brad just inside the Bar-L kitchen door. He yelled for other possemen, putting a gun upon Brad.

Sis Parker was now awake. She got to her feet with blazing eyes.

"Get the rope!" shouted James.

Cursing ranchers surged about Brad, one knocking him down. He got to his feet with the loop tightened around his arms.

"Git him outside!" ordered Luke James. "Soon as I find the boss, we'll string 'im up!"

"I don't think so, James!" stated a cool, clear voice. "Take the rope off Brad or you get it first, James! Brad, how come you was totin' Sis Parker into my house?"

"Why, well—you see—one o' Parker's hands was chasin'—not wantin' to shoot, I bucked 'im off—I—"

Brad was stammering. He was looking at the gun held by Miss Jennie. It was leveled at Luke James as he removed the rope. Others of the ranchers were growling. Larson Thorne, one of the ranchers on the Santos, spoke up.

"Makin 'some mistake, ain't yuh, Miss Jennie? 'Course I don't favor lynchin', but when a saddle bum stampedes our cows, kills a man, an' now has abducted a gal, I'd say—"

"String him up fast!"

The voice of Lon Parker himself thundered from the doorway behind Miss Jennie. Lon, cords still clinging to him, seizing Miss Jennie by the arm, twisting the gun out of her hand.

The sight of Miss Jennie's white face was too much for Brad. He took Luke James by surprise, clipping him a blow in the stomach. He was upon Lon Parker, slamming his fists into the big rancher's face before he could be stopped.

But force of numbers dragged him back then.

"Missee Jennie! Mistee Norton vellee sick!"

Old Ling stood in the kitchen doorway. Ches Norton, the supposedly murdered foreman, was held cursing, not daring to risk the point of the carving knife old Ling held at his back.

"Norton? Alive? What's the ranny?"

Miss Jennie replied to the chorus. But suddenly she had her gun again and it was pointed at Lon Parker.

"The ranny is that Lon Parker and Ches Norton framed that cow stampede, an' the killin' was faked to get rid of Brad Carver," said Miss Jennie. "Only Lon Parker slipped up. He boasted some tonight and he said Norton told him I was firin' him at the end of the month.

"That's true, but I didn't tell Ches Norton that until an hour or so before he was supposed to be killed. In that time he had not been where the herd was bedded, and he could not have told Lon Parker.

"I figured, men, that Norton must be alive or he could not have passed along to Lon Parker about his being fired. I sent Brad Carver who was with me, an' helped knock out Lon, over to get Sis Parker. I knew Sis would probably be hidin' Ches Norton or he would be about. He was."

"Then, by hokey!" roared Larson Thorne. "Lon was in on runnin' off them cows!"

"I took a message in Mex offen Lon when we tied him up," said Miss Jennie. "He was bein' paid for his own cows by the owlhooters who stampeded the Bar-L herd. An' that's about all."

Larson Thorne looked a little puzzled.

"You said, Miss Jennie, that Brad Carver was in your room?" he quizzed.

"I'm meaning it, Larson," said Miss Jennie, her chin high. "An' come tonight, the Lord and Santos law willin' we'll be married. Brad ain't exactly asked me, but I'm still Brad's boss."

Brad grinned a little.

"Yup, you're the boss, Miss Jennie—honey," he agreed.

LEAD PIZEN

NEWT RENFRO was all keyed up to spill his news, knowing it might be sticking his neck right into a hangrope. He had tried to round up befitting words, but he kept recollecting that only a few hours before, this same afternoon, he had openly threatened to put a sudden and violent end to the life and career of Steven Sprague.

Well, his news would stand Jimtown upon its collective ear. It would stampede the two score town folks, cowmen and riders in the Royal Flush saloon. It would shake all of Jimtown and all of the blasted range country roundabout as no other possible happening could have done.

Newt Renfro, six feet of good rawhide, topped usually by a friendly grin, pushed through the batwing doors of the saloon. He would have his say at once and as offhand as he could make it, he thought.

At the blast of Sam Jack's gun over the bar, Boler's hand whipped down and his iron banged on the floor.

By MAX NEILSON

Illustrated by Newton H. Alfred

Only a few hours before, Newt had threatened to put an end to the life of Steven Sprague. And now, when Sprague was dead and the law was closing in, it seemed that all of the town wanted to outvie him for the honor of the killing!

Newt halted just inside the batwings. His throat had gone unaccountably dry and his tongue was all at once too thick for easy speech. He remembered that at least one-third of Jimtown had heard his promise to salivate Steven Sprague, and by this time every mother's son had heard of it.

While he was swallowing and trying to unravel his tongue, big Pete Markle, the fattest blacksmith in the state, hailed him with booming cheerfulness.

"Hiya, Newt! Y' look peaked out! Y' give Sprague his come-uppance yet, or y' figurin' on spookin' him into signin' back yore timber range?"

Pete Markle's three chins wobbled with his own laughter. But a dozen faces turned toward Newt Renfro and there was not so much as a single grin among them. Newt saw Sheriff Dodd's grim, long face, made more mournful by his stringy mustaches.

Then there was Judge Rader, lined up next to the sheriff, his thatch of hair looking all the whiter against the high flush of his full face.

Newt's throat became drier and his tongue more swollen. The words of Pete Markle had made his news all the harder to announce. He could not just say, "Steven Sprague's dead." Not after what the jocular blacksmith had asked him.

Sheriff Dodd and Judge Rader were looking at him intently, and inside him Newt felt they were already judging him. As if they knew what he had been about to tell and feared for him.

Newt had to say something and he heard himself evading what he had intended to spill.

"Guess they ain't much chance o' any man gittin' his land signed back," he got out and imagined he would choke. "You see, Markle—"

Newt was spared an awkward finish for the time. The batwings snapped behind him. Lon Wolf, gaunt and hollow-eyed, his shoulders crooked from a lifetime of bending over his harness bench, pushed past Newt.

Lon Wolf whispered hoarsely in Newt's ear as he passed.

"Keep buttoned up, you young fool."

LON WOLF reached the bar close to Pete Markle with two quick strides. Markle was wearing his six-guns, as was every other citizen in the Royal Flush, including old Judge Dodd.

Many townsmen had not worn their guns for years until the past month or so. Not one citizen had openly voiced what might have been in their winds. Yet two-thirds of the population of Jimtown and the timbered ranges for miles around had seen their homesteaded holdings suddenly taken by strangers, dummy settlers who had descended like voracious locusts upon the Jimtown country.

It had all been legal enough. Too legal to be honest. Only Steven Sprague, the law sharp, had known of the government technicality that had caused them to lose their lands overnight.

Steven Sprague had been threatened by more than one man. But only Newt Renfro had promised to have his life. The rest of Jimtown had nursed its anger, biding its time on the advice of old Judge Dodd.

The curious eyes that, to Newt, had seemed accusing, turned now to Lon Wolf. The bent harness maker's voice was edged as he reached Pete Markle.

"I'm borrowin' your hogleg, Pete!" announced Lon Wolf. "I'll be fetchin' it back in two shakes!"

A hush descended upon the line along the bar. There was but one other man spoke. He was Jim Harkness, the general storekeeper, who had been seeing his business go over to the new store established by one of Steven Sprague's imported pilgrims. Everybody knew it was backed by Sprague, and would add to the huge profits he planned to garner from the dummy settlement of thousands of acres of good timber.

"What's eatin' you, Lon?" said Jim Harkness, and, being a sawed-off runt of a man, he lifted himself on his toes to see over Judge Dodd's shoulder.

"I no keel him!" squealed the little man. One hand was hiding something in the front of his shirt.

"Where's your own iron, an' what's proddin' you?"

Lon Wolf already had Pete Markle's hogleg, which he thrust into the waist of his pants. He replied to Harkness, but he was stalking back toward the batwings then.

"Nothin's happened!" snapped Lon Wolf. "Left my gun in the shop an' this won't wait! Don't nobody foller me! Said I'd be back in two shakes!"

Newt Renfro was speechless, trying to figure it. Lon Wolf was not the touch-and-go kind of a jigger you would expect to go off half cocked. He wondered if Lon Wolf had had a run-in with the

dummy settler who had been put on the timber strip the harness maker had homesteaded against his old age?

The batwings slapped open and shut again behind Lon Wolf. Sheriff Dodd half turned, but old Judge Rader laid a hand on his arm. Newt saw that Judge Rader was looking at him as he stopped the sheriff.

"Hold up, Dodd," said Judge Rader. "Wait an' see what is to come. Lon Wolf is steady an' knows his business."

They did not have to wait long, less than half a minute. Lon Wolf's boots clumped but a short distance along the plank walk. The harness maker's voice floated back over the batwings from a distance of perhaps fifty yards.

Every man in the Royal Flush was breathless, quiet, listening.

"Tol' yuh this is the end o' patience!"

The words whipped out by Lon Wolf drifted faintly into the dead silence inside the saloon. That bit of speech was spotted with a period, a double period.

The gun Lon Wolf had taken from Pete Markle blasted twice on the night. Only Newt Renfro was in position to see over the batwings, looking down the crooked street.

Newt sucked in his breath, wondering. He had seen the red double slash of gun flame. Unless he had lost his powers of observation, Lon Wolf had pointed the gun at the stars. The blaze proved Lon Wolf had held the gun over his head and fired upward.

BOOTS scuffled, but again Judge Rader interposed. Lon Wolf could be heard clumping back along the walk toward the saloon. He pushed back through the doors, the hot gun still in his hand.

Those at the bar and the card tables waited, frozen. Lon Wolf went to Pete Markle and handed him the weapon. He came around to face Newt Renfro before he spoke.

Then he said, his voice dry and humorless, "Make it what you want, gents. I've just drilled a thief an' range robber. Reckon it was time some'n stopped Steven Sprague."

Lon Wolf smiled, his mouth twisting to one side, and walked over to Sheriff Dodd. He put out his hands. But the lawman made no move.

Judge Rader cleared his throat, but Pete Markle, the fat blacksmith, beat him to words. His tone was as booming as ever and more defiant.

"Lon Wolf, y're a plague-tooken liar! Y' couldn't nowise have killed Steven Sprague! He's been dead nigh onto an hour! 'Cause I shot 'im myself, an' I'm right proud o' it!"

Newt Renfro shook his head with bewilderment. He was trying once more to untangle his tongue. In a minute now he expected there would be a rush outside.

Steven Sprague was dead. They would find the slick land grabber lying in the little alley back of the livery stable. Sprague would still be there, on his back, looking up at the stars with unseeing eyes.

"It ain't poss—" Newt meant to say it was not possible that either Lon Wolf or Pete Markle had shot Steven Sprague.

"I never seen such dangnation liars as frequents this 'ere drink emporium," interrupted Sam Jack, the bartender and owner of the Royal Flush.

Sam Jack was squinting his birdlike eyes and rubbing imaginary hair on his round, bald head. His drawled words turned his customers to him, for Sam Jack was a man who seldom spoke at all.

"I've been waitin'," added Sam Jack, "for some o' you gents to git mellowed up, so's you wouldn't be taking it too hard. Recollect I was out for some spell right after supper time? You see, I've been hearin' Sprague was figurin' on havin' one o' his hired jiggers open another saloon, which Jimtown ain't nowise big enough to support."

Pete Markle rolled his chins and cut in.

"An' I s'pose y'll be sayin' as how it was you that lead pizened Steven

Sprague?" he boomed. "Why, condemn yore—"

"Whope!" spat out Sam Jack. "You know as I don't stand for any man, drunk or dry, cussin' me in my own saloon! Yup! I plugged Sprague when he made a move as if he was meanin' to draw! Knowed he didn't never tote a iron afore he run this sandy onto us, but wasn't sure, an' I beat him to it!"

Judge Rader had folded his short arms across his ample stomach. His face was a shade redder than usual. Sheriff Dodd was wiggling his long mustaches like some ground squirrel chewing on a nut.

Newt Renfro got over to the bar, resting his elbows there to try and quiet the sick faintness riding him. He was beginning to get the drift of these boasted killings. He must speak now.

"If all-a you will listen—"

Newt's attempt was again lost. Once you heard the foghorn voice of Clem Boler, you never mistook him for any other jasper.

"You baldheaded prevaricator!" roared Clem Boler's drunken voice as he reared up, turning over a card table. "I'm sayin', Sam Jack, you'll take a cussin' an' like it! On account of it bein' me claims the honor o' liquidatin' that onery, land grabbin' law weasel! Yessirree! Hear me, Judge Rader, an' you, Sheriff Dodd! I killed the snake, an' now I'm gittin' out, an' up to my claim where they ain't nobody kin pick up my sign!"

Clem Boler staggered to the middle of the floor. Suddenly he dragged out his six-gun, weaving it around.

"Whadda you got to say to that, sheriff?" he bellowed, and at the same time thumbed the iron.

Bullets chewed the edge of the bar, so close that Sam Jack ducked, as bottles and the mirror crackled with the smash of lead behind him.

TO the amazement of all and sundry, it was Jim Harkness, the half-pint storekeeper, who made a jump and clawed into Clem Boler's gun wrist.

"It ain't so!" Jim Harkness squealed out the words. "I've been listenin' to you untruthful hombres, waitin' to see how far you'd go! I ain't wantin' anybody should take the blame for what I done myself! Sprague come to my store an' said I had to sell out for a tenth of what it's worth. I trailed him out an' let him have it!"

Clem Boler cursed wildly and threw Harkness off his feet as he jerked his gun hand free. He lifted the iron and it was plain he meant to pistol-whip the little storekeeper, being fired out of his senses by too much redeye.

Sam Jack's gun blasted over the bar. Clem Boler yelled with agony and his gun hand whipped down. But his iron banged on the floor and his wrist was bloody and dangling.

"Tol' you no man could cuss me in my own saloon!" rasped Sam Jack. "Sheriff Dodd, you wantin' to lock me up for killin' Sprague, or does Judge Rader hone to name a jury here an' now—"

Judge Rader had not spoken for some time. The redness seemed to drain from his face and his voice was as solemn as a Sunday meeting.

"I can't impanel a jury offhand," he said quietly. "Anyhow, what good would it do for me to permit this farce to go on? I never thought when I was honored by bein' named judge of Jimtown I would ever abuse this high position."

There was a silence then, such as Newt Renfro had never before heard at any gathering in Jimtown. Judge Rader was taking a derringer from inside his long coat.

Judge placed the derringer on the bar. He shook his head sadly.

"Don't know why I should have taken the pains to clean an' oil my gun after I did it," he said musingly. "I felt that I was the only one to perform this duty to Jimtown, being as I am supposed to know the law and should have been on guard against Steven Sprague."

Sheriff Dodd was tugging at one end of his mustache until his thin face was pulled all to one side. He sputtered some, but he got in his two cents worth.

"Don't—don't say it, judge. Folks,

(Continued on page 80)

RIDERS OF

THE flowers of the Montana prairie had died beneath the scorching heat of summer. The Indian Agency buildings stood out bleakly against the flats, a shimmer of heat playing above the galvanized-iron roofs. Two Indians stood, wrapped in their blankets, at the steps of the store. Billy Keene,

There w .s vicious conflict and murderous trickery brewing both inside and outside the Indian Agency—all because Lieutenant Lee Cameron's superior officer was half-crazy for vengeance on the Sioux whom the U.S. had agreed to protect. Now Lee had a choice of being court-martialed or helping those Sioux!

Illustrated by Frank Volp

THE BORDER

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

the storekeeper, stood above them, apparently engaged in some argument. Luke Trumbull, the agent, stood in his doorway across the wired enclosure, wiping his forehead.

A mile away, at Fort Lincoln, the tiny figures of troopers could be seen, leading their toy horses down to the stream, to water them. The flag was straining in the evening breeze. The sun was low in the west.

The scene was not a romantic one, and yet there was romance in the hearts of the two young people who reined in their horses on the low ridge above the Agency, and turned to look into each other's eyes. One was Lee Cameron, lieutenant commanding at the fort. At

Black Hawk's braves had ambushed and massacred a detail of the Twentieth Cavalry that day.

twenty-six, he still looked hardly more than a boy; with his light, curly hair and skin that seemed resistant to the summer tan, he might have seemed effeminate, but for the steely blue of his eyes and the compression of his lips.

The other was Judy Norris, niece of Mrs. Trumbull, a girl in her early twenties, her blonde hair hooped up under the big white stetson, her gray eyes just now frankly troubled.

"I'm glad we had this last ride and talked things out," said Lee. "Scales will be in tonight, and I suppose we must meet as bare acquaintances in future But I'm glad of our love. Aren't you, Judy?"

She couldn't speak. Lee leaned toward her, and took her hand. "It was all my fault, darling. I've acted like a cur. I never liked Jack Scales, but that didn't give me the right to steal his sweetheart."

"No, it was my fault, Lee. You see, I'd hardly met any men of my own age and race before Jack came into my life, ten months ago. He swept me off my feet. I became engaged to him without really knowing what love could mean. After you and I met, I knew. Oh, Lee, what are we going to do?"

"Are you going through with it?"

Judy caught her breath. "He believes in me. And he was one of the two men who escaped the Little Valley massacre six months ago. He wrote me that it seemed like destiny."

"Shall I tell him what a cur I've been or . . . do you think we can pretend we never cared for each other?"

She leaned toward him, and then his arms were about her, and his lips on hers. And, while they stared at one another incredulously, unable to believe that this was the end, a bugle sounded from Fort Lincoln, its high, clear notes piercing the thin air.

LEE had had to wait for about an hour while Luke Trumbull, the agent, made out his report. This was the justification for the ride with Judy. The report was still not quite completed when Lee got back. Gray-haired, motherly Anna Trumbull came out to him on the porch.

"I guess you know we're worried, Lee," she said. "I'm not one to talk, and my niece is old enough to know what she's doing. Frankly, neither Luke nor I approved of Jack Scales. There were some ugly stories followed him out here. You know what I mean."

"I've heard about them."

"I've heard he escaped being cashiered by the skin of his teeth, on account of that young officer who shot himself after losing all his money to Scales at cards. Now, of course, he's become a hero, being one of the two men who escaped from that Indian massacre at Little Valley. I think you should have stayed away from Judy, Lee. But I guess you'll both look on it as just a summer flirtation. What Scales don't know will never harm him."

"How about Judy?"

"She's loyal to the core. The two years she's made her home with us, she's become like a daughter to Luke and me. Well, it's a pity, Lee, but I guess things will sort themselves out. As soon as Black Hawk's captured, I suppose the command will be split up again, and either you or Lieutenant Scales will be transferred somewhere else."

"I suppose so," answered Lee.

Luke Trumbull came out, a sheaf of papers in his hand. "Here's the full accounting, Lee," he said. He glanced from Lee to his wife, and sensed the subject of their conversation, started to speak, and checked himself. Lee took the papers.

"Much obliged, Luke. I guess these ought to satisfy Lieutenant Scales."

"They sure ought to, the length of time I've put in on them. By the way, Lee, I'm not publishing this, but there's an old Indian here who saw the massacre in Little Valley. He says Black Hawk never got that army pay-chest that was in one of the wagons they burned. Said none of the Indians knew about it."

"Maybe it's lying in the scrub, then, though the ground was searched pretty thoroughly. Well, thank God that's one

thing I don't have to worry about," said Lee. "I'll see you later, Luke."

BY lantern-light and moonlight the squadron was riding into Fort Lincoln, through the gateway, into the

They were unable to believe that this was the end for them. .

enclosure about which were built the barracks and hospital and officers' quarters, machine-shops and stables. Lee had his own detail of a dozen men drawn up to receive Lieutenant Scales, his superior. Jack Scales halted his squadron.

Thirty-four years old, nearly ten years older than Lee. A veteran of Indian wars. Though beards were going out of fashion among the younger officers, Scales wore one, and long hair—like Custer's—hanging about his shoulders. It was ten months since Black Hawk had ambushed and massacred a detail of the Twentieth Cavalry in Little Valley, and here were the two survivors dismounting inside Fort Lincoln.

The other was Sergeant Benson,

standing there beside his horse, also spade-bearded, with a lean, drawn face, and little squinting eyes under penthouse brows almost bare of hair. Benson had a reputation as a tough fighter, one of the scalping crowd that had put the fear of God into the Indians by outdoing them at their own practices.

Scales said: "I'm taking over from you, lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

"Dis-miss! Fall out! Have your men show mine where to stable their horses, and have them fed. Then have them shown their quarters."

Lee Cameron said to his sergeant, Sharp, a lean New Englander, "Take over, Harry."

Scales's eyebrows rose. " 'Harry?' "

"Well, sir, we get sort of informal out here—"

"I think I've arrived at the right time, Lieutenant Cameron. I intend to enforce rigid discipline, particularly in view of the disturbed situation."

"Yes, sir, I understand. May I show you to your quarters?"

In the officers' dining-room, Sam, the colored waiter, was spreading the cloth for dinner. Scales looked about him with approval. He said: "I'll talk to you tomorrow, and give you an outline of my plans. You've met Miss Norris, of course?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Scales."

"She must have had a dull time here. Does she seem in good spirits?"

"I think she's been bearing up pretty well, sir."

"That's good. I shall be riding over to the Agency after dinner, to get the reports."

"I've brought them, lieutenant."

"The countersign for tonight is *Montana*. Ask Sergeant Benson for any information you require. That sergeant of yours—"

"Sergeant Sharp, sir."

"Yes—'Harry', I think you called him. Benson takes precedence over him. That will be all for the present. Oh, come in, Dean. This is Lieutenant Dean Cameron."

Lee shook hands with an amiable young fellow, evidently only lately out of West Point.

LEE looked up as the sergeant entered his room. "Well, Harry?"

"They're a tough lot, sir. That Sergeant Benson has been ordering me around."

"Lieutenant Scales has given him precedence over you. I'm sorry, but I can't help it."

"That ain't worrying me, Lee. Here today and gone tomorrow—that's the army way. But they're a tough crowd. It was a section of their squadron got killed in the Little Valley massacre, and they've sworn to have Black Hawk's scalp, and the scalp of every one of his braves. And of course Lieutenant Scales and Sergeant Benson mean to do just the same thing."

"I can understand how they feel."

"Yeh, but lookit, lieutenant. Scales has been sent here to accept Black Hawk's surrender. Black Hawk agreed to come across the Canada line and surrender to the U. S. Government, provided we forget the past. And these fellows have sworn to have the scalps of the lot of them. I ain't too fond of Injuns, but a treaty is a treaty."

"Well, but I don't quite get you, Harry."

"I mean, if we're detailed to take Black Hawk over from the Mounties, under a pledge of peace, and then have the responsibility for a massacre, it don't look so good to me."

"Well, no . . . nor to me," said Lee. "But all we've got to do is to obey orders, and the responsibility rests with Lieutenant Scales. Just sit tight, Harry—and, by the way, you've got to be Sergeant Sharp to me henceforth. Lieutenant Scales is going to enforce rigid discipline."

"I get it, lieutenant." The sergeant grinned.

IT was almost midnight when Scales came back from the Agency. He walked into the officers' room, where Lee

Lieutenant Scales ordered: "You'll start tomorrow with twenty men, to receive Black Hawk from Canada."

was waiting for him, and at a glance it was evident that Scales's suit had not been going smoothly. Lee wondered just what had happened between him and Judy.

He had thought it might be possible to make a clean breast to Scales of the part he had played, but he'd known him casually for several years, and Scales wasn't a man who could be approached on a human level.

Then Scales had been embittered by that affair of the gambling debts, which had made it impossible for him to remain in the army unless he chose a frontier post, where a man might have a chance to live down his past.

"How long have you been stationed

here, Cameron?" asked Scales.

"Going on five months, lieutenant."

"You've made good use of your time, haven't you?" And there was no mistaking the significance of Scales's remark.

Lee only answered: "Well, sir, we tried to follow orders, to sit tight and fraternize with the Indians as far as possible, until we knew how this Black Hawk business was going to turn out."

"You seem to have obeyed orders quite literally, Cameron. In fact, you may even have gone beyond them. Well, I'll talk things over with you in the morning. Good-night, lieutenant."

"Good-night, sir."

Lee went to his room in the officers' quarters. But for a long time he tossed upon his cot, wondering what had happened on the occasion of Scales's visit to the Agency, and whether Judy had flatly rejected him.

It wasn't until the summer dawn came stealing in at the window that Lee finally dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER II

Trouble Looming

SCALES and Dean were sitting at the desk when Lee Cameron entered the office, in obedience to Scales's summons. It was evident that the two had already been in consultation. Scales put down a big cigar with a lurid red and gold band, and rasped:

"Sit down, Lieutenant Cameron. I suppose you have some knowledge of the negotiations with Black Hawk?"

"I understand that he's negotiating to surrender to the U. S. Government, and that a force of Mounties are to convey him to the border."

"You're just a little out of date. The negotiations have been completed, and the transfer is to be made next Friday at noon."

"Yes, sir."

"That's the scoundrel who trapped and ambushed my men, and got away with the army pay chest containing more than fifty thousand dollars. Instructions are, he's to be herded back into the Sioux reservation with his followers, provided they're peaceable."

"Yes, lieutenant."

"There are about a hundred and fifty Indian bucks with him. Apparently all the past is to be forgiven and forgotten, unless he shows fight." Scales stared into Lee's face. "You get my implications, lieutenant?" he asked softly.

"Not exactly, sir."

"Well, since you seem a little slow to understand, the situation is like this: The reservation is swarming with bucks, ready to join up with Black Hawk and his braves, and wipe us out by sheer force of numbers—wipe out all our detachments over a large part of the northwest. If we don't teach the Sioux a lesson, they'll teach us one. Do you begin to understand now, lieutenant?" asked Scales, an ugly sneer in his voice.

"I believe I do, lieutenant, and I shall be glad to receive my orders," answered Lee.

"You'll start tomorrow with a detail of twenty men, to receive Black Hawk from the Canadians. Your first task will be to get him and his braves across the boundary. Then you'll herd them toward the reservation through Little Valley, past the place of the massacre. Those are your orders."

"Very good, Lieutenant Scales."

"Sergeant Benson will accompany you and handle all the details. And, by the way, if you want that sergeant of yours —'Harry'—take him along by all means. That will be all, Lieutenant Cameron."

RIDING over to the Agency with Sergeant Benson that afternoon, to check over some supplies, Lee had the chance of a few moments' talk with Judy.

Her face was radiant. "I told him I wanted to be released," she said. "I had to. I knew, as soon as I saw him, that I couldn't go through with it. But of course I didn't mention you."

"He knew, though."

"Did he, Lee? He seemed so nice about it, said he understood how I might

The old Indian reeled and dropped, two Colt slugs in his brain.

have changed during the months that had passed. And yet I'm afraid of him. There's something about him that doesn't ring true, Lee. He'll do you some evil if he can. He's that kind. I've heard stories about him. You want to watch out for him."

Lee laughed. "I guess the storm will blow over," he said. "And as soon as I get my promotion—?"

Judy came into his arms for a moment. Then she was gone like a flash. Outside the sounds of an altercation arose. Lee, at the office entrance, was horrified to see Sergeant Benson kicking and pummelling an old Indian in a blanket, who retreated impassively before the white man's oaths and violence. Luke Trumbull was hurrying up, but Lee got to the spot first.

"Are you crazy, sergeant?" he shouted.

Benson's face was mottled. "That's one of the swine who were at the Little Valley massacre!" the sergeant shouted. "I heard him bragging about it to one of his fellows. He thought I didn't under-

stand Sioux." Benson glared harshly.

"Don't you know the orders are strict against laying a hand upon an Indian? I'll have to report this to the commanding officer."

Benson laughed. "Listen, Lieutenant Cameron, if you'd been in that massacre yourself, I guess you'd see things in a different light," he answered. "I tell you the whole reservation's crawling with these vermin. They ought to be exterminated, the whole crowd of them. By the way, lieutenant, you speak Sioux, don't you?"

"A little," said Lee.

"Maybe you knew who that fellow was, then?"

"Sergeant, I'm not discussing this incident. When I've reported it to the commanding officer, my duty's done."

Benson only laughed again, as he climbed into his saddle.

THE formal reprimand that Scales administer to the sergeant was so obviously a mockery that Lee withdrew from the office with the full realization that the two men were in league against him. His discomfort was not lessened when, in reading the orders for the day, he found that all twelve of his own men were detailed for the journey to the Canadian border. Of Scales's force, Lieutenant Dean and Sergeant Benson, together with six troopers, made up the residue.

"Well, sergeant, what do you think of the situation?" he asked Sharp, when they met for a few minutes alone that evening. "I'm coming around to your point of view."

"I've been hearing a lot more talk," said Sharp. "They ain't too well disposed toward us, those fellows Scales brought with him; and they've got loose mouths. I got some idea of what's being planned."

"What?"

"Appears like we're to guide Black Hawk and his braves into Little Valley, as far as the place of the massacre. You know that country maybe? It's a hollow in the mountains, kind of a sink-hole, with high rocks all around, and all heavily wooded, except the valley itself, which is grass with only a scattering of scrub oak and jackpine. Black Hawk couldn't have located a better spot for ambushing our men. And now they're aiming to turn the tables on him and ambush him there."

"Whose plan is it, Harry? Lieutenant Scales's?"

"Lookit, Lee, Scales and Benson are as thick as thieves. And they're the only two who survived the massacre. Some say they were both skulking somewheres else when the attack started, instead of being with their men. I don't know nothing about that. But you can wager all you got they're both at the back of this."

"Oh."

"Anyways, that's what the men think. And that's why Scales is sending our old crowd to bring Black Hawk and his braves along. He figures maybe we won't know too much and thereby balk at the job. And he's sending six of his own fellows to oversee the job. And Benson, of course."

"And Dean. How about Lieutenant Dean? What part is he playing in this deal?"

"Why, I don't know, Lee. He seems a nice, quiet fellow. But what are we going to do?"

"Obey orders. Herd Black Hawk and his men into Little Valley. Harry, Scales practically told me what his plans are. I can't see an officer like Scales jeopardizing his career from the motive of revenge. He nearly lost his commission some time ago, and this would mean the end of him. But I've got a plan, Harry. I can't somehow see ourselves working a dirty game like that, when those Indians are coming back under Uncle Sam's guarantee."

THE squadron was to start at sunrise, to cover as many miles as possible before the heat of the day. It was some eighty-five miles to the Canadian border, two full days' march for horses heavily equipped. There were no wagons,

no tents; each man carried a carbine and a hundred rounds of ammunition, a haversack with four days' rations, blanket rolled behind his saddle, and a water canteen.

Scales, giving Lee his final orders, said: "It's a pity in a way you weren't able to close your eyes to that little breach of discipline of Sergeant Benson's, Lieutenant. I shall expect you to rely considerably on Benson. He's one of the best Indian scouts in the army."

"Doubtless, sir."

"I shall meet you in Little Valley and take over from that point. Is everything clear, Lieutenant Cameron?"

"Not altogether, sir. You spoke of teaching the Sioux a lesson, as you may recall. I didn't quite get your meaning. Of course, I understand your men are very bitter against Black Hawk—"

"You are not required to understand anything beyond my orders, lieutenant."

"Very good, sir."

"You have no objection, I suppose, to leading Black Hawk and his gang to Little Valley, halfway here?"

"Not in the least, sir."

"Good, so far. I want you to take especial care of young Dean. He's brimful of enthusiasm, but he's never seen action yet. Not that I anticipate action, of course, lieutenant. But you'll keep him by you so far as possible, and let him get his first taste of plains life."

"Yes, sir."

"Everything is at last clear to you?" sneered Scales.

"Everything, sir," replied Lee, with an emphasis that made Scales look hard at him for a moment.

CHAPTER III

Herding Sioux

THE plod of hoofs, the creak of carbine buckets and saddles, the heat increasing in intensity as the sun mounted higher. The plains that gave way to mountains, the traversing of deep defiles; the midday rest, and the travel into the cooler evening. They had covered more than fifty miles by the time Lee gave the order to halt and make camp.

It was not difficult to see that his own half-dozen and Scales's men were not on the best of terms. They separated naturally at the halt, built separate campfires, even picketed their horses on different lines.

Lee saw little of Sergeant Sharp that evening, but he saw and heard him being hectored by Sergeant Benson, who pointedly avoided consulting Lee before issuing orders. Lee judged it was no time to make an issue of discipline—in fact, he rather imagined that Scales had purposely sent him on this mission in order to put him to the test. He ate his supper with Lieutenant Dean.

He had made a point of keeping young Dean with him as much as possible during the ride, and had invited him to share his supper with him. The younger officer seemed amiable enough; he'd pass muster with the rough crowd he handled, by letting Sergeant Benson have full charge. Most young officers had to take it in that way until they learned their business.

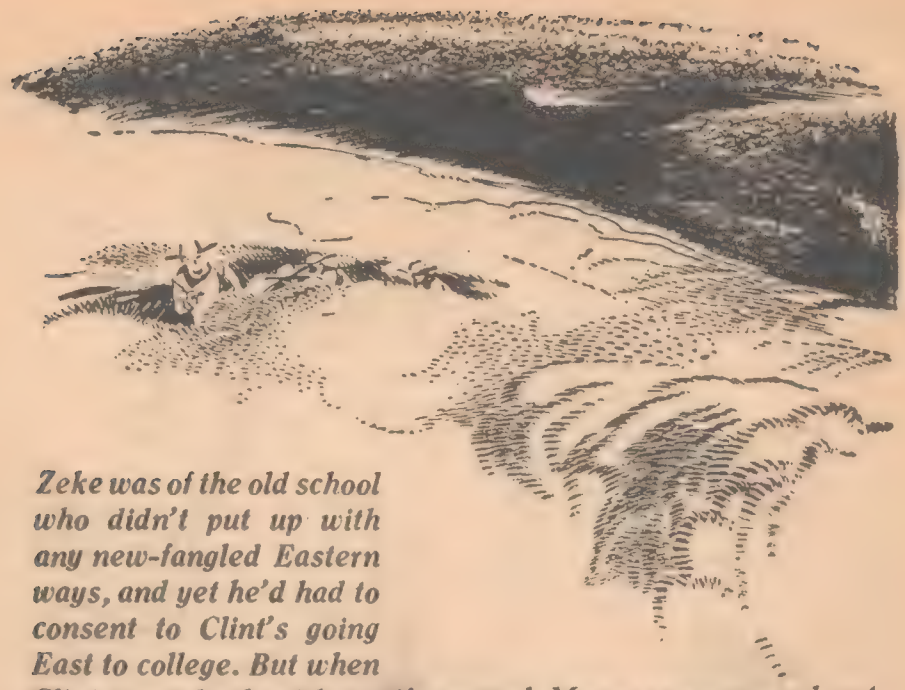
Lee said, half-joking: "Lieutenant Scales seems quite interested in you, Mr. Dean. He asked me to watch over you during the journey."

Dean said nothing, but went on eating his supper, choked on it, and looked up. "Jack Scales is the biggest scoundrel not yet hanged, lieutenant," he answered.

Lee looked into the younger man's face. It was round and cherubic, but there was a core of hardness somewhere in Dean's nature, and Lee seemed to have tapped it.

"I know I oughtn't to say this, Lieutenant Cameron. But, you see, it was my half-brother, Captain Jim Stiles, who committed suicide after Scales got all his property away from him at cards, cheating him like the crooked shyster he is. Poor Jim had the gambling mania, couldn't resist gambling away everything he had. And Milly was left with

(Continued on page 85)



Zeke was of the old school who didn't put up with any new-fangled Eastern ways, and yet he'd had to consent to Clint's going East to college. But when Clint came back with a wife named Marya (pronounced not "Mary", but "Mary-ah"), who had a habit of changing her pretty dresses two or three times a day, that was too much . . .

"MARYA?"

Clint Hardwick called his bride's name, easing the tread of his boots from heels to toes as he crossed the Pothook kitchen.

"Mary-ah!" mimicked Zeke Hardwick with blistering sarcasm. "As if the grand old name of Mary wa'ant good enough for her likes!"

Clint tried to bring humor into his eyes, but only his wide mouth smiled for Zeke. He was starting to strip off his sweaty wool shirt as he looked expectantly toward the sitting room.

"Mary-ah ain't there, *Clinton dear*," mocked Zeke through his two-months' growth of untrimmed whiskers. "She's stirred her lazy bones for oncet an' gone ridin' with Lorna. Maybe she'll be late for supper an' yuh won't hafta whittle off yore beard."

Clint ignored his dad's scorn. Old Pardee, the cook, was already whanging the iron triangle to call the half dozen hands who were loafing around the bunkhouse. The Pothook riders, a few rough and tough as they made them, had been eating at the long table in the big house dining room.

That had been Zeke's cantankerous idea after he found out that the new Mrs. Clint Hardwick changed into Sunday-go-to-meeting duds for the evening meal, and expected "Clinton dear" to do the same. It was Zeke's further notion to show his resentment over Clint marrying an Eastern city girl that caused him to stop trimming either his hair or his whiskers.

"Which horse did Marya take, father?" asked Clint with a furrow of concern wrinkling his forehead.

"Blacky," chuckled Zeke, as if he had been prepared to relish this announcement. "An' if that fiddle-footed limb o' Satan don't set her down some'ere on

By CARL MASON

Illustrated by
Newton H. Alfred

From their vantage point above, the attackers kept bullets buzzing like bumblebees around him.

KILLER'S CARE

them tight ridin' pants o' hers, then I don't know Blacky."

Clint handed Zeke a setback on that one though. This was the city bride's first ride on a Pothook beast and the old man had expected at least a cussing from the stranger that four years of college had made of his only son.

"Good," grinned Clint. "I was afraid you and Lorna might have picked out one of the sway-backed jugheads. Blacky will give her the kind of ride she likes. He won't set her down."

Zeke glared at him. Then Clint's grin was replaced by a sudden scowl, as he had just remembered something.

"Which way did they go?" he asked. "I suppose Lorna had sense enough to take the ridge trail?"

"Nope!" cackled Zeke, scoring again. "Lorna said as how she was honin' to show Mary-ah the gorjus sunset in the notch of Mantrap Crick, so they took out the Bearfoot trail."

CLINT'S teeth clicked together. He pulled his shirt back over his shoulders. He uttered a cuss word that Zeke had been hoping for, but it was mild.

"Look, father," he said, and the name made Zeke swear, having always been called pop before Clint had gone East. "I haven't told you, and the boys have kept it quiet, but Chan Dorgan's rustlers have been working this way up the Mantrap gulch. Three days ago they cut out more than a hundred head of the 77 beef and wounded two of Martin's riders. We've been posting a night guard."

"Yuh?" Zeke's tone was skeptical. "Like as not it was some of the 77 riders done it. Martin ain't too keerful o' who he hires. Chad Dorgan ain't been within two hund'ed miles o' the Bearfoot range in five years. Leastwise, Lorna Bradshaw ain't a tenderfoot."

"Nope," replied Clint, pulling a filled belt from a cupboard drawer and strapping it around his slim waist. "Lorna isn't a tenderfoot. And she isn't several other things to make her a rightful guest of the Pothook. Of course, this ride was Lorna's idea?"

Responding to the call for chuck, the hands were clumping into the kitchen. Some were grinning, anticipating another meal of the kind that would bring them further into Zeke's favor.

"Sure 'nough, come to think on it," nodded Zeke. "'Twas Lorna's idea. An' what things is it that Lorna ain't that she wasn't when yuh was courtin' her five or six years ago? You actin' up as if yuh wa'ant eatin' out'n her hand when yuh was no more'n a sprout."

Clint was aware of the hands pausing to listen. He took down the Winchester and stuffed his pockets full of cartridges. Then he walked out onto the porch, knowing Zeke would follow.

"Let's get this straight," he said then. "You don't like my wife. You saw she was unaccustomed to roughing it here, where you haven't made one modern improvement since you squatted on the Bearfoot and made money enough to build this house. Seeing that Marya didn't take to the richest cattleman on the Bearfoot living like beginning nesters, you've made it as tough as possible for her."

"Tuck in yore horns!" rasped Zeke. "Yuh hitch up with a high-falutin' uppity hellion what thinks yore dad hain't good enough for her, an' yuh fetch her home with the idea she'll take over skirt-bossin' the Pothook, an' when she sees we ain't cut o' that kind o' cloth she nigh honeyed what I'd hoped might turn out to be a he-man into agreein' to quit the Pothook an' sashay back East!"

"Marya hasn't insisted on returning East," said Clint hotly. "When and if she does, I think I can make out back there as well as here. We'll talk this out when I come back. Your bringing Lorna Bradshaw up from Boise hasn't worked out, not one little bit."

"Maybe I did, an' maybe I didn't reckon on yuh gittin' some sense about Lorna!" exclaimed Zeke angrily. "Yore fine, mincy lady ain't fitten for this range! She ain't touched a pot nor pan since she got here, an' yore ma—"

"Yes, my mother cooked and scrubbed and sat up with cows in calving time and all the rest of it to make the Pothook what it is," said Clint bitterly. "Including working herself to death. You can stop thinking Marya will go back East and that I'll stay here to repeat making a fool of myself over Lorna Bradshaw.

"Soon as we come back tonight, we'll be packing to leave the Pothook."

Clint went off the porch and out to the corral where his roan was still saddled.

"Yuh born fool!" called Zeke after him. "Tryin' to hand me a tall yarn about rustlers an' Chan Dorgan bein' hereabouts! All that's worritin' yuh is what Lorna's like as not tellin' yore Mary-a about the week yuh two got lost in the hills!"

Clint shut his teeth on an oath as he put the roan into a long lope.

CLINT was trying to be fair. From the moment Zeke Hardwick had set eyes upon the delicate, fair-haired Marya he had openly displayed his disappointment.

Being of the old school of cowmen who had gouged out profits from the first untamed Bearfoot range, Zeke hadn't changed much in his sixties. He had been compelled to consent to Clint going East to school after Clint had taken the bit in his teeth and earned his own money for that.

Zeke had even been prepared to welcome Clint home. But when he had seen the girl bride who wasn't more than about five feet high, with her slim white hands, her proper but shy manner of talking, and her habit of changing her pretty dresses three or four times a day, Zeke had turned thumbs down.

It galled Zeke most to discover a certain steel of spirit under the bride's smiling refusal to accept the Pothook as it was. It had been good enough for Clint's overworked mother, and it had to be good enough for Clint's citified wife.

Then when he had found that Clint was head over ears in love with this "uppity chit," and more than likely would go back East at her say-so, Zeke had made the Pothook much rougher than it had been.

When he had chanced upon Lorna Bradshaw, the one mistake of Clint's adolescent years, Zeke imagined he was being crafty in inviting her to the Pothook. Lorna had been here two weeks.

Whatever else she might have managed with her easy living in Boise, Lorna had been too careful with herself to become coarsened. To Zeke's way of seeing it, Lorna was a fine, upstanding beauty who was fitting to be the real mistress of the Pothook

To Clint the lady of his past was a sleek and finished cat, with a power over men that could only have been gained by experience. He thought of this as he pushed the roan along the upper bench of the Bearfoot where he could scan the horse trail along the winding way of Mantrap creek.

Zeke had guessed wrong again when he had taunted Clint with fearing what Lorna might tell Marya. That was one phase of his life that Clint had forthrightly confessed before his marriage.

But even so, Clint had not been so much concerned with a possible visit of Chad Dorgan's owlhooting rustlers as he had with suspecting Lorna Bradshaw of being unscrupulous. He regarded Zeke's notion that he might again yield to Lorna's very evident charms as absurd.

However, Clint had studied Lorna deeply enough to believe that she was not the stripe to play a losing game, nor was she the kind to stand quietly aside and hope that in the due course of time there would be a separation in her favor.

Which was the real reason he now put the roan to a faster pace.

"The Bearfoot trail isn't the best for a ride, and any sunset that Lorna might have had in mind could be better viewed from the upper ridge," mused Clint, viewing each reach of the creek. "No telling what four years of easy living

in Boise has done to Lorna's way of seeing things."

He had told the truth about Chan Dorgan's raid on the 77, and he had posted four riders on the lower meadows of the Bearfoot, just in case the rustlers might be tempted to try running off some of the Pothook cows. Even so, he had believed that Chan Dorgan had struck suddenly, then jumped to another range, that having been the practice of the elusive outlaw.

Clint judged Marya and Lorna had been riding fairly fast. He had come three miles now without sighting them. Half a mile below him he could see all of the trail where it passed through a creek fringe of silver poplars.

Here the creek was deep and swift. Lower down, not far from the Bearfoot notch, the creek shallowed. For a mile or more it was a clear, sparkling stream, with a gleaming yellow bottom which tempted any rider to make an easy crossing.

IN years past an occasional rider who had not learned Mantrap creek had tried that shallow crossing. The sparkling sands proved their deadliness at these times. Horses and riders had never been seen again.

Because the Pothook did not graze its cows in the vicinity of the creek, the trail was unfenced. It was rarely that a straying creature had been lost.

This was in the back of Clint's mind and he tried to laugh it off as sheer foolishness.

"Whatever else Lorna is, she isn't a killer," he said aloud, but he knew he was taking to cover his own doubt. "She was brought up here and she knows the danger."

Zeke knew the danger, too. But Clint respected Zeke too much even to suspect him of the thought that persisted now. He had not so much as hinted at it to Zeke.

Stubborn and as openly resentful as he might be, Zeke Hardwick would still have been shocked had he known what had sent Clint riding so suddenly. Zeke was contrary, and he disliked anyone he believed to be leading an easy life, but he was not vicious.

"Marya did have some hope of winning him over," mused Clint. "But I guess it's no use. She can't endure much more of this, so the choice is up to me, whether we go or stay awhile longer."

Bemused by his thoughts, scrutinizing the creek trail, Clint wondered if his ears had suddenly tricked him. A fair wind was blowing at his back toward the notch, now a mile or so below. It had the effect of muffling a sudden, crackling sound.

Yet Clint pulled up shortly. What he had heard could have been distant shooting. And it could be in the vicinity of the Pothook line where four riders had been keeping watch.

On the bench above Clint the wide stretch of grass had been cropped, but was still good grazing for several scattered bunches of yearling stock. He had ridden past two small groups feeding between rocky hummocks where the grass gave way to hardier sage.

There had been but the one small burst of sound, and Clint judged he might have mistaken low thunder from a storm up along the hogback for gunsmoke. Abruptly his conjecture was forgotten.

Below and ahead of him, about half a mile away, Clint saw the two riders, Marya and Lorna. The girls had pulled up their mounts and were motionless at the moment.

Even at this distance Clint could catch the shine of the sun reflected from the rippling shallows of Mantrap Creek. He drew a breath of relief at seeing Marya and knowing she was all right.

Clint grinned and pulled at the roan's ears. Marya, along with the determination that marked her thinking also was gifted with a keen sense of humor.

"Sure as Tophet, if Lorna is telling the story of her life, or one or two juicy bits of it, Marya will be taking it all in with the pretense of being shocked

The horse seemed to be trying to climb out of the water, but already the quicksand was at work.

and with the devil dancing in her eyes," muttered Clint. "Now—no—no! Marya! No!"

His retrospective words whipped into a shouted warning as a chill ran like ice along his spine. As he yelled hoarsely, knowing his voice would carry but faintly and probably would not be understood or heeded, the rider on the glossy black horse reined the beast straight into the shallow creek.

And Lorna, the other rider, appeared to be turning her own mount to follow. Clint's shout became a panicky, choked scream in what amounted to an agonized physical and mental effort to stop Marya. But the glossy Blacky, instinctively sensing the danger of the deadly,

sucking sands, reared and plunged, doubtless preventing Clint's cry from reaching the girl's ears.

FROM this high point the bench shelved down with abrupt, uneven steps that compelled any rider to take a zigzag course. Still shouting, Clint started the roan recklessly down the steep grade.

The horse was down but one shelf, stiffening its forelegs against sliding over one of the sheer steps. Clint saw that his warning was unheeded and he dragged the six-gun, thumbing back the hammer.

The Eastern school had done its best to make him a different person from the button who had fairly cut his teeth on a Colt. But it had not caused him to lose a gun swiftness as he proved by snapping two shots, with the hope this would turn Marya's eyes toward him.

Perhaps the shooting did turn her. But not soon enough. The black horse suddenly appeared to be trying to climb out of the water, but that was because its hindfeet had lost their footing and its haunches were sinking into the bottomless quicksand.

Because of his own gun exploding, Clint did not hear other shooting. He thought the roan had footed into a badger hole when the beast's head dipped, unseating him and hurling him forward.

But there was a numbing blow across one thigh as he started to fall. His gaze fastened upon the terrible thing that was happening in Mantrap Creek, Clint still did not understand as he doubled his body to ease the shock of landing on the rocks.

For he saw Marya's arms suddenly raised as if she were trying to free her feet from the stirrups. And the other horse, carrying Lorna had been turned back into the trail and put into a fast run.

That was all of it he saw, for Clint struck the ground with a bruising shock that partly stunned him. When he cursed wildly and tried to get to his feet, the left leg caved under him.

Maddened, calling Marya's name, Clint attempted to drag himself from between two jutting rocks where he had fallen. He became aware then that the roan gelding kicked feebly once or twice and lay still.

Then it seemed as if bumblebees were buzzing in the rocks. But bumblebees did not leave little gray splashes. And when Clint pulled his horrified eyes from Mantrap Creek where Marya seemed trying to climb onto her saddle, and where only Blacky's head showed above the shallow water, four or five riders were sliding from their horses some hundred yards above him.

The riders were shooting as they alighted, two with rifles. Clint crouched instinctively lower, pulling his head down The attackers scurried behind the nearest sage hummock, from which vantage point they kept the bumblebees of bullets buzzing even more insistently.

Clint groaned, uttered wild oaths, and attempted to find a way down to the Mantrap Creek trail. There was no footage for twenty feet below him, even if his one leg had not gone dead and useless.

One of the four attackers took a chance on standing up to size up Clint's position. Clint steadied his six-gun and fired. He could tell that the distance was too great for the short gun to be effective.

FLATTENED, dragging his numbed leg, Clint crawled toward the roan to get the Winchester from the saddle boot. All the fates appeared in conspiracy against him.

Still heaving from the shock of a bullet that had hit behind its ears, the roan made a sudden scrambling effort. The horse came part way to its feet, then it slipped and pitched on over the edge, breaking its neck on the rocks twenty feet below.

Clint knew the bitterest moment of his life. A glance showed Mantrap Creek. The shallows of the fatal quicksands

His leg was practically useless beneath him, but there was nothing to do but find a way to the trail below.

glimmered under the rays of the setting sun, quiet and peaceful.

There was no longer a sign of either the black horse or Marya. Whether he lived or died ceased to concern Clint. He discovered that his final shot at the standing outlaw from his short gun had emptied its cylinder. He did not trouble to reload.

Yet there was the inborn fighting spirit that impelled him to make such effort as he could.

"Marya wouldn't want me to quit," he muttered deliriously.

To gain a better view Clint propped himself higher against a rock. The rustler was still standing. The sun was full upon the outlaw and there was no mistaking the yellow face and slinky figure of the part Chinese.

Chan Dorgan's monicker was on account of his Chinese mother.

Clint surmised that the Pothook riders on guard at the notch had been salivated.

The rustler boss and three men had come riding to round up the scattered yearlings grazing up here.

Clint swore fervently as he thought of the chance Chan Dorgan was giving him, if he could have recovered the Winchester. His helplessness caused him to raise himself farther, seeking a possible way of worming nearer to the hidden gunmen.

He found out too late how smart Chan Dorgan had been. The outlaw leader had known he was shooting only with a six-gun. He had deliberately exposed himself to draw Clint's attention.

One of Chan Dorgan's men had snaked his way to another point of vantage at one side. Clint did not see the smoke or hear the crack of the rifle.

The thudding bullet hammered solidly at his skull.

ZEKE HARDWICK was swearing in steady rhythm with the clunking of his horse's feet on the trail. Only a few minutes after Clint's departure Zeke had passed up chuck to saddle and ride.

"Ding-damn! Ding-damn!" His mild oath became monotonous.

"Clint's a pigheaded fool to be thinkin' Lorna'd go so fur as to want bad harm to come to Marya," he muttered through his untrimmed whiskers. "Why'd the pesky gal hafta take Lorna up on goin' fur a ride anyway?"

His words denoted that Zeke was not as easy in his mind over his personal war against Clint's soft, pink-and-white bride as he had been pretending.

"Might be Chan Dorgan has sized up the prize pickin' along the Bearfoot," growled Zeke.

As if he had evoked it, there came the sudden echoing rattle of gunfire. It was made fainter by the direction of the breeze at Zeke's back and the jutting shoulders of the hogback that verged into the grazing bench ahead.

Zeke put his heels to the dun he was riding. But he pulled up as he caught the gay colors of Lorna Bradshaw's riding duds, and the swift movement of her pony coming up the ridge from the creek trail.

The bold attractiveness of Lorna Bradshaw lay in the flashing shine of her black eyes and the curved perfection of her tall, well-knit figure. As Zeke pulled up short, the deep tan of Lorna's face was heightened by a flush of excitement.

"Zeke! Oh, Zeke!" she cried out, her bosom heaving with her emotional outburst. "I'm so glad you're ridin' this way! Marya—Marya—"

Lorna appeared to choke trying to find more words.

"Yeah, Marya?" snapped Zeke, prompting her. "What's it?"

"She—there was shootin' on the bench—Blacky was spooked—he plunged into—into—"

Her hands flew up, covering her eyes as if to shut out the horror of what had happened.

"Yuh mean Mantrap crick?" Zeke's voice cracked. "Marya did—didn't get out?"

"No—no—she couldn't—"

"Yuh ding-damn devil!" shouted Zeke. "Why'n't yuh help her? Why'n't yuh git a pole—throw yore rope—yuh got one! Yuh—"

"The shootin' spooked my pony, too—he bolted—"

"What shootin'? Yeah—that's what I heered—yuh git back to the place—roust up the hands—where'bouts is Marya?"

"Nigh a mile—but she's—she'll be gone—"

"Git ridin'—yuh see Clint?"

"Clint? Then maybe it was him they was shootin' at—"

"Fetch all-a the boys!"

Zeke jammed his heels into his mount. His angular body rocked and jolted in the saddle as he sent the beast recklessly down to the lower trail on the creek. He put the horse into a flat run in the trail, swearing a blue streak.

ZEKE hauled up, rearing his horse, as his keen, old eyes picked out the unmistakable sign on the sandy shore of Mantrap Creek. A set of jumbled horse

tracks went into the shallows, and did not show there had been a return.

Zeke got down, studying the bank on the other side, barely twenty yards away. There was no sign over there. He had known there couldn't be.

Still cursing monotonously, Zeke looked at the series of steep steps leading from the creek trail up to the bench. There had been shooting. That he believed, having heard the faint echoes.

Now there was no sign of human life. He could see some of the Pothook cows grazing far up among the sage and rock hummocks. Zeke rubbed a hand wearily over his sweaty forehead. He tried to keep his eyes away from the rippling shallows where clear water murmured over the peaceful sands.

There was naught he could do now. His broad mouth, the same as Clint's, was compressed.

"Lorna said her horse was spooked an' bolted—why in time did I hafta fetch her from Boise? An' Clint—?"

"Stand hitched, Hardwick! Hell! Ain't this somethin'?"

Zeke had not heard them. He swung around. His yellow face and slanting eyes smiling. Chan Dorgan stood there with his thumbs hooked in his belt. Beside him stood a man with a knife scar from chin to eye, grinning.

"A'right, Hardwick—"

"Whadda yuh want?" Zeke grunted; then added, "Yuh see a gal ride inter the crick?"

"Yuh, we seen her," stated Chan Dorgan with malicious softness. "Guess she was wantin' to cool off. She didn't ride out."

"Look, boss," said the other man, and he was holding a six-gun at hip level, pointed steadily at Zeke. "We ain't no time to waste. They'll be some o' the other Pothookers ridin'."

"Yeah, Melter," rasped Chan Dorgan. "Hardwick, fork yore hoss. We're ridin'. Yuh rode right into it. Reckon you're wuth more on the hoof than all yore white-faces."

Perhaps Zeke's thought for Marya had obscured other thinking. He did not quite understand. Maybe he wouldn't, now.

"Me?" he exclaimed. "Yuh thinkin' I'll be wuth—"

"Aw hell, boss!" rapped out the other man. "Let's git goin'! This ain't no place to palaver—"

Zeke Hardwick had never taken an order in his life. His joints may have creaked, but he jumped straight at the outlaw holding the gun. Instead of shooting, the outlaw cursed, stepped easily aside and hit the side of Zeke's head with the gun barrel.

Zeke was staggered, but still on his feet, turning.

His head was spinning and his ears roared so that he failed to hear the whip-like crack from the rocks above. The outlaw with the gun was off balance as he struck Zeke and he kept on turning, slowly, queerly.

Chan Dorgan yelled, "Lader! Reynolds! Git that skunk!"

The man who had hit Zeke went to his hands and knees, then to his face. On two sides the figures of men with rifles reared into view from among the bushes.

Doubtless Chan Dorgan had spotted Zeke coming, and had smartly figured the percentage in kidnaping the Pothook owner. He had set his ambush trap and waited.

One of the men in the bushes cut loose a shot. There was another crack. The outlaw's rifle bounced into the sand as his body sagged into the bushes.

Chan Dorgan shouted an oath, jerked his six-gun and grabbed Zeke in his long arms. He swung Zeke around, using him as a shield against the hidden gunnie on the bench. The one other surviving outlaw had ducked back into the bushes.

THE rifle cracked out three shots quickly. Lead fanned the bushes. The concealed outlaw screamed and the branches about him shook, then were still.

"Git to yore hoss!" snarled Chan Dorgar his powerful arms locking Zeke in an overpowering embrace.

Chan Dorgan was walking backward, pulling Zeke with him.

"Git 'im, Clint!" yelled Zeke as he drove one spurred heel backward, ramming the blunt steel into Chan Dorgan's shin.

Zeke saw the puff of blue smoke. He could have sworn a bullet clipped a lock of his untrimmed hair. Chan Dorgan should have been swearing lustily over the shin kick that had torn to the bone just under one knee.

Chan Dorgan did not swear or even cry out. It was doubtful if he ever felt the kick. His limp arms fell away from Zeke and his face rubbed Zeke's back as he slid down.

"Waal I'll be ding-damned!" gulped Zeke, turning and seeing the blue hole in Chan Dorgan's forehead.

There was a rattling of sliding rubble.

"You all right, father?"

As he heard Marya speak, Zeke opened his bewhiskered mouth, but no sound came for a full ten seconds.

Marya was sliding down into the trail. Her riding duds were torn and her damp, fair hair had tumbled down around her shoulders. Her face was a pale whiteness now, except for a bleeding scratch extending the width of one cheek.

She was holding a Winchester in both hands, and she was so small it looked as if it would topple her over.

"You? Marya? But yuh cain't be here—"

Zeke gulped and swallowed hard. He turned his eyes toward the sands of Mantrap Creek where a bare two feet of clear water rippled over the bottomless bed.

"I'm all right, father," and Marya's voice was calm. "But Clint—" Her voice broke. "He's bad hurt, perhaps dead. They shot him. That's why I had to kill them."

Zeke shook his head.

"It couldn't be, Marya. Nobody ever waded out'n Mantrap."

"But anyone could lie flat and swim over the quicksand in that much water," supplied Marya. "Can you climb—I forgot? Your head's bleeding. Stay here, and I'll go back to Clint."

"I'll be ding-damned if'n I will—"

Zeke made his protest stubbornly. But the world was turning black suddenly. And soundless, so silent that Zeke missed hearing the thunder of running horses coming from the direction of the Pothook home house.

CLINT HARDWICK first saw a dimity curtain blowing in an open window. He could hear the home ranch milk cows and by that sound he judged it must be evening, with a sun setting and making a golden light.

His head ached dully and he was so bandaged that he could see with but one eye. Gradually he understood that he was home. He was lying in the big double bed.

Slowly his memory brought him around to glancing about. For a brief minute he closed his eyes. He almost wished he had not awakened. For his head was upon the only pillow on the wide bed.

"Marya?" he whispered.

There was no one in the room with him. From that he judged he must have been home for some time, and that he was recovering. He tried to recollect all that had happened, but it was vague.

Then he heard the whanging of the supper triangle. Clint knew he had to find out about all this. He could not wait. He found he could stand by holding onto the bed.

He heard the hands clumping past the window, evidently going to supper. They were gabbing to each other.

"Yeah, Old Zeke was honin' to raise old Ned an' go after that Bradshaw hellion but that Marya wouldn't have none of it," said one of the riders.

Clint thought he must be delirious . . . Marya?

"Heck, I'll bet yuh Lorna run her into the creek, even if Marya says it ain't so, an' Lorna jest run off hell-bent 'cause she thought Marya was a ghost—"

The voices faded. Clint could scarcely breathe. Clint went along the wall to the window. His brain kept telling him Marya was dead. He had seen her die.

He watched the hands trooping into

the house, across the porch. The roughest of them were putting their hats along the railing. They were slicking back their hair. They were passing a comb from one to the other.

Clint guessed he might be alive, but that being shot in the head had left him clean loco.

When he got into his pants and felt his way along the hall, he heard voices in the long dining room. Zeke was talking.

"Yessiree, doc, I'm tellin' yuh for the twentieth time yuh never seen sech shootin'. An' that scalawag Clint never told me that my daughter Marya was the champeen of that 'ere college gun club, an' she could ride anything on four legs—"

Clint held up, breathing heavily from his effort. He heard a laugh that he recognized as Doc Caldwell's. He guessed Doc must be out here from Gunbolt on account of him being shot.

A great hope that he did not dare to at once transmit into happy reality brought a tightness to Clint's throat. It was true that he had not told Zeke that little Marya had been the crack shot of her college gun club, and one of the best horsewomen who ever rode in her home town show.

But Marya was dead. Clint could not forget the shimmering peace of Mantrap Creek after he had seen Marya struggling to free herself from the saddle of the black horse.

Lorna had murdered her. But what did they mean about Lorna running away, and Marya stopping Zeke from raising old Ned?

THEN Clint held his breath. Marya was alive, or he was dead and everybody had gone to heaven. It was her voice.

"You're sure, Doc Caldwell, that Clinton will be all right?"

"Sure I'm sure," replied Doc Caldwell heartily. "So far he's been talkin' out of his mind, but that'll clear up in another day or two. It was only concussion."

"But it's been a week, Doc Caldwell."

"Hey, Marya!" boomed Doc's hearty voice. "You'll have to quit sittin' up nights with him. You're worritin' too much."

Clint restrained an impulse to shout. He moved toward the dining room door. Marya was laughing. Then she spoke again and Clint could not believe his own ears.

"You're not so good at carving, Dad, but you'll get onto it," Marya was saying. "Look out, or you'll have the whole roast in your lap."

"Ding-dammit, Marya!" That was Zeke. "If yuh kin l'arn Pardee to roast a mess o' beef like that, I'll carve it or bust a hame string tryin'. Now yuh shuck thet apron an' sit down to yore sup—I mean dinner."

Clint was wobbling, physically and mentally, but he reached the dining room

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door. Thus far his awakening had been one shock after another. He thought there could not be any more.

But there was.

He saw Marya, her face flushed and prettier than ever, walk around the long table to a chair beside Zeke. She was wearing an apron over a plain gingham dress. Her sleeves were rolled to her elbows on her rounded arms.

There was another shock. Nigh a dozen hands shuffled to their feet and stood up until Marya sat down.

Clint stood there, unobserved as yet, staring at Zeke.

Zeke's hair had been neatly shorn. His beard had been trimmed to a pointed Van Dyke. He was wearing a white, boiled shirt and his seldom worn Sunday-go-to-meeting suit.

As Marya saw him, cried out, and came running around the table with her hands reaching, Clint knew they would not be going back East.

He heard Zeke chuckling.

"Tell yuh, Doc, it ain't many old buzzards like me has the ding-damn' luck to git a daughter like Marya."

Swing Your Boot Toes High

(Continued from page 35)

desperate plea from the darkness of the cabin.

"A'right, Hank—yeah—they ain't ary other way now I can see—I know about the others you brought here—ifn' it's known I was here, they's nobody in Tamarack would believe—"

Hank Marker's cutting, nasal voice broke in then. Bart flattened himself on the shelf above Quarles, listening. Beads of cold sweat trickled down his nose.

"'Taint what folks believe, yuh locoed filly!" said Hank savagely, his speech floating up in the darkness. "It's gonna be so what they think! Do yuh take a swig o' that whisky, or do I hold yore nose and choke it down yore pretty throat? Either way, come mornin' you'll be ready to ride peaceable enough to the judge's house."

"Hank! Don't! I won't drink it! I'll—"

THERE was a sudden scuffling, the sound of a slapping hand, and Jean cried out, "Hank! Oh, don't—you most tore off an ear—they'll lynch yuh sure—"

"Drink that whisky down, or choke! Yuh gi' me an idea! What happens will happen, but come sunup yuh'll be hog drunk, an' nobody won't be believin' nothin' yuh say—it'll be put onto yore fancy Bart Layton, the same which ev'body knows is befoolin' both Laura Pasant an' you, and who snuck back into Tamarack an' disappeared—see?"

Jean screamed then. Bart, leaning far over the shelf of rock above Quarles, saw that Quarles himself was on a ledge looking down upon the roof of the Marker cabin.

A chair or table overturned in the dark cabin. Evidently Jean was putting up a fight, although from her words it seemed she must have been bound by the vengeful Hank Marker.

"So yuh still keep on pinin' for Bart Layton?" shouted Marker, his voice thick and gloating. "Well, Bart or nobody else would love yuh when they know—"

Bart kicked hard with his toes. With one gun swinging free in his hand, he dived upon the unsuspecting Quarles.

Quarles went "A-rr-gh!" Bart's hard, lean weight nearly cracked Quarles' spine. Then both were whirling over and over, with Bart getting one hard slam at Quarles' head with the barrel of his gun.

Bart was half stunned as his weight combined with Quarles' smashed through the cabin roof. They fell together in the darkness. Bart rolled free of Quarles

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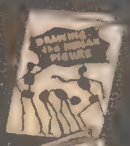

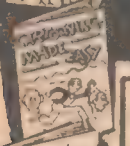

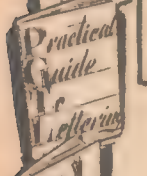

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and he heard Hank Marker curse wildly.

"What yuh hornin' in for, Quarles?" added Hank Marker.

Bart came up, his knees weak, but fury driving him. He had a vague outline of Jean between him and the open cabin door. She had been tied in a chair that had fallen over. Bart could make out the perfection of her bound figure, even as he staggered toward the sound of Marker's voice in the darkness.

"Look out, Hank—!"

Quarles gulped out the words from his position on the floor. Unable to find a target for gun or fist, Bart suddenly took a wallop in the face that sent him down. He tried to rise, but felt paralyzed.

"Reckon this changes the face o' things!" roared Hank Marker. "It couldn't be cozier, my fine lady! I've got my iron on yore Bart Layton, an' I'm waitin' only for yuh to say we ain't bein' hitched! Keep on bein' stubborn an' they's ways o' leavin' both you an' Bart to be found where yuh holed up in my cabin!"

"Don't, Hank—I'll say yes—I'll marry you, Hank—but let Bart go—if yuh don't, I'll make it so you'll have to kill me—"

"Smart gal, an' ifn' I leave Bart live to hitch up with Laura Pasant as his mail comin' through the store says he's honin' to do, yuh won't dast talk—"

It was then that Bart, still too weak to regain his feet and have any chance with Hank Marker, and unable to shoot accurately in the darkness without a chance of hitting Jean, heard Quarles move near him.

Without compunction, Bart kicked out solidly with one spurred boot heel. He found ribs and brought a deep groan from Quarles.

"Whassat? Quarles, yuh hurt—?"

Hank Marker made his mistake. He stepped from the darkness beside Jean and was for a second or two outlined between Bart and the doorway. Bart Layton never had been absolutely dumb.

All within a split second he figured out that to kill Hank outright and perhaps his foreman, Quarles, would put Jean Gregg in a position where she must talk, admit what had happened. Tamarack had its claws out always.

Any story that might be told would involve Jean. Better to take a chance on being killed, and keep Hank Marker alive.

BART thumbed his .45. It jolted and jolted again. He was shooting low and he exulted in knowing the first lead had broken Hank's leg. But Hank scored him twice with lead, once directly through one ear.

Bart, desperate then, waited until he got the solid thud of a bullet in his side. But he fired at the flash of Hank's gun. Hank Marker howled like a coyote in a trap as his gun arm was shattered.

Bart managed to get to his feet, one side sticky with blood. He struck down with the barrel of his iron at the squawking voice of Hank Marker. Hank became silent when iron and bone crunched.

Bart had just enough strength left to put his gun in Quarles' ribs.

"Untie Jean, or I'll sure 'nough scatter yore innards all over the shack!" commanded Bart, who felt himself going. "Jean, soon as yuh git loose, find yore hoss an' light a shuck out'n here. Yuh ain't never seen Hank Marker's cabin tonight, understand?"

"Bart—I can't—"

That was all Bart heard. For Quarles just then returned the kick Bart had given him, only his boot heel struck Bart's chin. The cabin and the canyon collided, with Bart's conscious brain between them.

As he went out, Bart imagined he heard hoof clatter. That he could hear Laura Pasant crying out. That he was being picked up and tossed into some kind of a meat-grinding machine that kept singing a metallic song. . . .

JEAN'S grave, brown eyes were looking at him. Bart blinked as he saw Jean smile, a bit sadly. To make it more confusing, Bart could also see the bright, blue eyes of Laura.

He closed his own eyes in self defense.

Nothing had changed. He still had two bears by the tails, he guessed. Maybe so he could die and become a happy, carefree saddle bum in that greener pasture the preacher always talked about.

Then he had a sinking sensation. Maybe he was already dead. Maybe Jean and Laura were dead, too. He snapped his eyes wide open and found he had but one useful arm and a wonderful headache.

"Feelin' better, Bart?" said Jean, her soft hand slipping under his head. "Doc Clark dug the lead oct'n yuh. Says yuh'll do fine. We brought yuh to the Barrel-M."

Bart shook his head. It felt as if it would fall off. Yes, it was Jean speaking. Jean who had sent him away to collect culture to match her own.

"It was a wonderful example of rough surgery," said Laura Pasant, her voice cool and her enunciation perfection itself. "Well, Bart, it appears that you have caused Hank Marker to decide suddenly that other atmosphere will be better for his health."

"Yeah, Bart," drawled Jean. "Hank sure 'nough hit the trail out with his busted arm an' leg, with Quarles helpin' hold him in the hull. Maybe so I'm some disappointin', Bart, seein' I had to take over the Barrel-M an' run it myself while you was gettin' yourself a professorship.

"Reckon Laura's more like what yuh'll be honin' for now."

Bart wished he could give up the ghost quietly and depart in peace. Here was Jean. Right back like she had been when they were kids.

And here was poor, little Laura who had roped herself a schoolin' for his sake. He wasn't so sure he wasn't in love with both of them, but his eyes kept coming back to Jean's clear features, to her warm, grave smile.

Yes, it was Jean. It had always been Jean. Words didn't mean a thing.

"Hank Marker wanted the Barrel-M almighty bad," said Jean. "He went gunnin' for yuh, Bart, as soon as he heard yuh was back. An' I tried to find

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yuh but was too late. I guess it was Laura yuh come home for, an' I guess —well, I'm willin'—"

"Great catymounts, Jean!" exploded Laura Pasant. "Yuh think I'd want the tick-ridden saddle-bum? He ain't even all in one piece any more. Look at that ragged ear, an' the doc took out one o' his ribs."

Of all shenanigans, this was the last that Bart had expected. Two of the prettiest gals in Tamarack County were fighting over him. Yeah. Fighting to try and pass him off on the other gal.

He had to decide this, and now.

"Jean, I guess yuh can't swap me off," he said mournfully. "An' Laura, at last I'm seeing things as they are. It has to be Jean. But Laura, I ain't sure how I can ever make up to yuh what—"

Laura Pasant put her fingers over his lips. Jean smiled at her and closed her left eyelid. Bart thought she winked at Laura. Then he was sure she had.

"Your Profesor Smith who wrote all o' them fine letters for Bart won't want to be waitin' for when Bart can stand up to make it a double wedding will he, Laura?" said Jean. "He's been waitin' two weeks now for yuh to reach Bart an' tell him how it is."

"Professor Smith will wait only until tomorrow, Jean," said Laura, her blue eyes twinkling. "Parson Newton is coming over then. Bart, I'll never live long enough to thank you for bringing Professor Smith. He says even your misspelled words convinced him he had to come West to see the gals any cow waddy would spend two bucks a week just to send them fancy writing."

Bart closed his eyes. His good hand gripped Jean's fingers.

"The sneakin', dollar-grabbin', unprincipled son of a sidewinder," he muttered. "Usin' my writin' an' cuttin' hisself in on my gals at one buck a letter of my dough. Jean, sweetheart, we'll do our best to see this professor feller gives Laura a square deal, dang his hide!"

"Yes, Professor Bart Layton," said Laura softly. "And Professor and Mrs. Smith will do the same for Jean. And how she'll need it."

Lead Pizen

(Continued from page 53)

Judge Rader is our most esteemed an' beloved citizen, ain't that right?"

"Right as rain!" boomed Pete Markle, the blacksmith. "An' if this ain't the dangedest bunch ' liars! None o' yuh has got sense enough to bang a tame bull on the rump with a bass fiddle! I killed Sprague, an' I ain't lettin' nary other ranny take the glory!"

Newt Renfro pushed himself away from the bar. But Sheriff Dodd reached out one long arm and slammed him back.

"Keep yore yap shut, Newt," grated the sheriff into his ear. "Keep yore mind onto Mary. It was on account o' her bein' Steven Sprague's stepdaughter, an' him honin' to marry her hisself that yuh threatened him. Now that he's been salivated, what she don't savvy won't hurt her none."

"But sheriff," gulped Newt. "I've been wantin' to say—"

Sheriff Dodd's hard hand reached up and clamped across his mouth. The sheriff faced around, looking at Judge Rader.

"I reckon I've made a plumb mess o' the whole thing," said Sheriff Dodd sadly. "Havin' all of my fellow citizens willin' to take it on themselves is right touchin'. I can only say that when I started out I only meant to arrest Steven Sprague an' lock him up, an' then try bluffin' his hired land thieves out'n Jimtown. But Sprague got proddy, an' was resistin' arrest. So what could I do? My good friend, Judge Rader, was even ready to give up his bench, an'—"

Newt Renfro twisted his face free of the sheriff's hand.

"If everybody'll listen—"

"It seems, son, there ain't nothin' more to be said until after there's a regular inquest," said Judge Rader quickly. "I see Doc Padway comin' in, and he's the coroner."

JOVIAL Doc Padway stood inside the batwing doors. His eyes twinkled.

"From the little I've heard, I'm forced to conclude that one Steven Sprague has given up the ghost—hallelujah!"

At the rear of the saloon a couple of cowpunchers were involved in a hot argument.

"Yuh dried-up, white-livered squirt!" yapped one. "Yuh ain't got the sand to bat down a grasshopper! I'm sayin' it was me gun-smoked Steve Sprague, an' I'll stick by it if they hang me higher'n Hannibal!"

"It was Hamaan what was hung, yuh ig'norant dogie pusher!" yelped the other puncher. "It was me that Steve Sprague come for with both his sixes smokin', an' stood there duckin' lead ontil he'd plumb emptied both o' his irons 'fore I triggered once, jest once, that's all!"

Newt Renfro shivered. He had almost forgotten what he had intended to tell when he entered the Royal Flush. He saw a bland smile on Doc Padway's cherubic countenance.

"Seems all this is sort of getting out of hand," observed Doc Padway mildly, pulling a revolver from under his black coat and depositing it carefully on the bar. "Boy an' man, I've watched a heap of Jimtown citizens grow from three-cornered pants to brush-poppin' chaps. I've devoted my life to conservin' the health of all kinds o' folks."

Newt Renfro goggled at Doc Padway speechlessly. No. Not the kindly, smiling doctor who was the nighest to a sky pilot Jimtown had ever had.

"Yessir," went on Doc Padway. "I love Jimtown. I've watched it grow. As of the last tally, Jimtown had one hundred and ninety-eight souls, forty or fifty Mex, and Steven Sprague. This population tonight has been reduced by one."

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Doc Padway pulled out a plug of tobacco and chawed off a corner. He lumped the cud comfortably into one cheek.

"To this date I've tried to live honest and upright when it seemed to be the best policy. I've brought some of you into this world. As the public coroner I've had the last word when some folks have been accidentally ushered into the next."

Judge Rader shook his head sadly, his face resuming its normal blood-red hue.

"Not you, doc—not you, too," he muttered.

"And tonight I am at last given some measure of reward," went on Doc Padway. "I seem to be about the only citizen of Jimtown who didn't kill Steven Sprague. Gents, whassay we adjourn to the spot where I can officially view the mortal remains? If one o' you red-handed killers will be so kind as to direct us to where you left the *corpus delicti?*"

NEWT RENFRO walked from the Royal Flush with old Judge Rader on one side and Sheriff Dodd on the other. It was a dignified procession, except for a few of the rougher characters who were confused by their imbibing to the point of trying to prove their right to be known as the gunman who had killed Steven Sprague.

Just outside the saloon the inquesting parade was suddenly halted. Everybody knew Mary, the hazel-eyed, copper-haired girl who had the misfortune to be the daughter of the woman who had mistakingly married Steven Sprague.

Mary's disillusioned mother had passed on but a few months before this time. Since then Mary had left the home of her stepfather. But the law sharp had served notice upon young Newt Renfro that his courtship of Mary must cease.

Steven Sprague had decided that he would keep Mary in the family. Mary had other ideas. Newt Renfro was the chief one of these.

Mary stood, slim and straight, her worried eyes upon Newt.

"Please, Newt, tell me it isn't true," she said tensely. "He is dead, but you didn't kill him? Tell me, Newt!"

Newt swallowed hard and spoke. But by this time his power of speech was not what it should have been.

"Ye-es, Mary—ye-es—he is—is dead—ye-es, Mary—"

One of Judge Rader's short arms doubled and his elbow jammed into Newt's stomach. Doc Padway took Mary's arm.

"Run along home, Mary," advised Doc Padway. "Don't worry. At this time it appears that Newt Renfro and me are the only male inhabitants of Jimtown who didn't shoot your stepfather."

"I don't know what to think," exclaimed Mary. "But I want everybody to know it don't make any difference between Newt and me. Even if they hang him, I'm meaning to marry Newt Renfro."

Mary raised to her toes to kiss Newt suddenly. The many killers of Jimtown cheered lustily.

"Tell them the truth, honey," whispered Mary. "I'll be waiting for you."

"I've been tryin'," muttered Newt. "How I've been tryin'."

Newt's most coherent speech of the past hour was lost suddenly. A small, shadowy figure darted from the black mouth of the alley leading behind the livery stable.

Sheriff Dodd moved with amazing agility for his age.

"Halt! Or I'll drill yuh!" shouted Sheriff Dodd, letting fly with his .45 and furrowing the street dust about the flying feet of the skulker.

The fugitive turned, his hands lifted. Beady eyes showed in a dark face. Black hair strung down over his forehead. One hand was hiding something in the front of his shirt.

"I no keel heem!" squealed the little Mexican. "He ees steal my teember! Hees hombres keel my sheep! But I no keel thees Sprague! No! No!"

"And what is this, Jose?" demanded the sheriff, twisting the hand of Jose Montez, one of the good Mexicans of

Jimtown. "Why are you hidin' this knife?"

Sheriff Dodd wrenched the keen blade from the cringing Jose. He rubbed a finger along its bright steel.

"Blood, an' it's fresh, Jose? How do yuh account for that?"

"No—no! I no keel heem!"

"Then you're one of the few in Jimtown who didn't," grunted Sheriff Dodd. "Say! Did yuh just take yore knife out'n the corpse of Steven Sprague?"

"Si—si—but I didn't keel heem!"

Jose was a shivering wretch. Well he knew the gringo's justice when it came to speedy dealing with a Mex.

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Doc Padway. "Isn't that a knife, Sheriff Dodd?"

"Why—by Lucifer! It is a knife, doc!"

"As the coroner, I ask you to bring along Jose and we will view the remains before we take any snap judgment," directed Doc Padway. "All of those citizens who shot Steven Sprague will stand by."

AN awkward silence had fallen upon all there assembled.

Into that silence, as they trudged into the alley back of the livery stable came the voice of Newt Renfro.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you all the time. When Lon Wolf saw the body after I had seen it first, he was mistooken in thinkin' Steven Sprague had been shot. I tried to let you know that I found Sprague lyin' back there with the knife still in him."

"Well, by tunket!" boomed out Pete Markle, the fat blacksmith. "Why the devil didn't yuh say that in the first place?"

Two lanterns had been carried along. Under their glimmering light the huddled body of Steven Sprague, law sharp and land grabber, ruthless robber of honest settlers of Jimtown timber plots, lay face downward.

Doc Padway took the knife of Jose Montez from Sheriff Dodd. He knelt beside the corpse, carefully examining the

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bloody slit in the coat directly between the dead man's shoulders.

Jose Montez had been standing beside the sheriff. His dark skin had turned almost gray.

"I no keel heem—"

The little Mexican jabbered the words over and over again.

Doc Padway looked up, after he had investigated and discovered only the one fatal wound in Sprague's back. His mild eyes surveyed the ring of Jimtown citizens.

"Let me see," said Doc Padway slowly. "Jose Montez lost all of his homestead timber, I believe. His only dependence was his sheep. Thieves hired by Steven Sprague killed Jose's sheep."

The onlookers muttered and nodded agreement.

"Numerous citizens have tonight confessed to killing Steven Sprague," went on Doc Padway. "Is there here present any citizen who saw Jose Montez remove his knife from this *corpus delicti?*"

There was a moment of silence.

"It is agreed that no one saw Jose Montez—"

"No—no—I didn't keel heem—I—"

"All those here assembled have heard Jose Montez say he did not kill this man," proceeded Doc Padway. "Is there any person here present who can, of his own knowledge, swear that he saw Steven Sprague die? If so, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Old Judge Rader looked at Sheriff Dodd. The sheriff pulled at his stringy mustaches and glanced quickly away.

Pete Markle, the fat blacksmith, looked at Lon Wolf, the skinny harness maker. Neither one spoke, only Lon Wolf muttered something to himself about the next time he saw a dead man he was going to do some investigating before he started shooting.

Sam Jack, the bartender, rubbed his shiny pate. Jim Harkness, the storekeeper, looked at Newt Renfro and grinned a little.

Newt knew that all of these men had believed he had killed Steven Sprague. Each and all of them had tried to shield him by confusing the issue.

But here was Jose Montez, the Mex, who had no one to shoulder his undoubted guilt. Jose had suffered as much loss as the others from the sharp dealing of Sprague.

It did not seem quite fair to Jose.

Doc Padway cleared his throat, put on his most serious official face and nodded sagely.

"As the coroner of Jimtown I hereby declare that one Steven Sprague came to his death by means of some mysterious poison, which I will be unable to identify without performing an autopsy. Have I the approval of the court for such an autopsy?"

"No," replied old Judge Rader promptly. "The kind of poison, unless the same is lead, is wholly irrelevant and immaterial."

"Then," solemnly stated Doc Padway, "in my official capacity as the coroner of Jimtown, I hereby announce that Steven Sprague came to his death by his own hand. He committed suicide. Gentlemen—the case is closed!"

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Riders of the Border

(Continued from page 63)

almost nothing. Maybe I've said too much?"

Lee was silent, but he seemed to be acquiescent in Dean's remarks, for Dean went on:

"I had just entered West Point when this happened. Jim and Scales were stationed at Fort Blake, which was always notorious for its extravagant living. There was a group of rich officers there, and Scales fleeced them all. Somehow he seems to have gotten away with it till poor Jim shot himself."

"Then?"

"The matter was hushed up. There were too many big shots involved. Instead of being cashiered, Scales was sent out to the West. Then, after the Little Valley massacre, for some reason he became a sort of hero, fully re-established. I don't know how these things are done. But as soon as I graduated I made up my mind to hound Scales until I detected him in some crooked act."

"And?"

"I knew that once a crook always a crook, and I'd get him sooner or later. I pulled enough strings to get sent to his squadron, and I'll get him yet. Do you know what he's planning to do about Black Hawk?"

"I can sort of guess," said Lee.

"Are you going to take part in it?"

"No, I've got a plan of my own that I hope will spare us this disgrace. But why did Scales attach you to me, and tell me to take especial care of you, Dean?"

"Because he knows who I am. I'd hoped to keep my identity secret, but it was a letter I had from Milly. She writes a peculiar hand, and he'd seen it on Jim's envelopes. He didn't let on he knew who I was, but I found him staring at the envelope, and I could tell from his manner that he knew."

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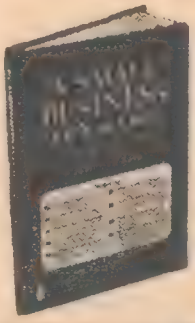

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"And so?"

"He hated you even more than me. It's about some girl at the Agency. I don't know the ins and outs of it, but it seems to have made him a laughing-stock among the men. It's my belief he's sent me with you so that he can settle the score with us both at the same time."

"Hard things to say about another officer, Dean."

Dean looked mutely into his face, and Lee clapped him on the shoulder. "Son, lots of things are queer out here," he said. "One's apt to lose the West Point perspective out on the plains, where ordinary values don't seem to apply. What you've told me is strictly your own business. Keep your eyes open, and remember, I'm back of you whatever happens."

THE American-Canadian border was marked by a small stone structure meant to function indifferently as a guardhouse and a customshouse. An officer and three men comprised its tenants. Across an imaginary line, two hundred yards away, there was a similar building, and an enclosure black with squatting Indians.

At the imaginary line two red-coated Mounties received Lee and his squadron. Papers were produced and exchanged. "You'll find them according to the tally," said the Mounty sergeant in command. "That's Black Hawk with the feather in his hair. A hundred and sixty-two of them. Lord, what a time we had persuading them to leave Canada! We've shepherded them two hundred miles, my mate and I."

"Sounds like they're pretty peaceful?"

"Oh, well, an Indian's all right when he isn't on the warpath. They've just finished supper, and they're carrying three days' rations apiece. If you're ready for them, I'll shoo them across the line."

The squadron had fallen into line. Each man had his carbine ready. It wasn't needed. Led by Black Hawk, an elderly Indian with a hooked nose and deeply wrinkled copper skin, the Sioux filed over the imaginary line. There were some thirty squaws among the crowd, but no papooses. Sullen, blanketed, the line proceeded into Montana.

"Cut that out, men!" Lee ordered, as jeers and catcalls rose from Scales's six men.

There was silence; then a voice called: "You wasn't at Little Valley, mister!"

"Sergeant Benson, take that man's name," said Lee.

Benson, affecting not to hear, shouted: "Hold it, boys! You'll git your chance with them swine later!"

The jeering stopped. Lee rode up to Benson. "Sergeant, I gave you an order," he said. "Maybe you didn't hear me?"

"I heard you, lieutenant, but my ears wasn't quick enough for me to catch which soldier's voice it was."

That was defeat for Lee. "See that it doesn't happen again," he said. "Remember, those Indians are the wards of the nation."

The look that Benson gave him was so merciless in its antagonism that Lee realized young Dean hadn't been far wrong in his decipherment of the situation.

They marched till well into the night, the troopers herding the files of blanketed Indians along the trail. When they camped, Sergeant Benson posted guards around the huddled groups. There was no further attempt to provoke an outbreak, and Benson must have given his detail instructions on that point.

SERGEANT SHARP said: "I don't like this set-up, Lee. You told me you had a plan. What is it?"

Lee called to Dean, who came over from the other side of the campfire, where he had been sitting; then drew a roughly sketched map from his pocket.

"Here's Little Valley," he said, tracing it by the light of the blaze. "Its length is indefinite—that's to say, of course, it's never been surveyed. That depends on where you choose to say it begins and ends. The site of the massacre is the sink-hole, and we'll be close to the sink-hole about noon tomorrow."

"So?"

"Here"—Lee traced another line—"is the trail we took to Canada, passing on the other side of those hills. And here's another trail connecting that one with Little Valley."

"And?"

"My orders are to herd Black Hawk and his crew into Little Valley, when Scales will take over. But I've got no orders to proceed to the site of the massacre. I've carried out my instructions, Scales hasn't taken over, and now there's no reason why we shouldn't take that trail through the mountains, and get to the reservation without passing the sink-hole. If Scales is planning any retaliatory ambush, he can wait up at the place of the massacre till the crack of doom, because we'll never get there."

Sergeant Sharp was enthusiastic. "That sure is a swell plan, Lee," he said. "Only, don't forget, Benson's got six tough hombres who can make trouble."

"How about our twelve?"

"They'll obey you, lieutenant. They've had enough of Benson and his crowd."

"What do you think?" Lee asked Dean.

"It's a good plan," said the young officer. "I'm with you, of course. But I'd say we mustn't give Scales a technicality for court-martialing you."

"No chance of that. I know what his orders were," said Lee.

CHAPTER IV

Ambush

LEE had traced his map from vaguely outlined sketches of the north Montana country, but the Territory was still imperfectly known. He could only hope that the trail he had drawn actually existed.

He had weighed the consequences carefully. It was true that, technically, he should have to hand his charges over to Scales, who had advised him that he would meet him in Little Valley and take over from him. At the same time, it seemed unbelievable that Scales would demand a court-mtrial, and so bring things out into the open.

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What Lee couldn't understand was young Dean's suggestion that Scales planned to rid himself of both of them at the same time. It was true Scales might have a quarrel with Lee on account of Judy Norris, but to hazard his career and perhaps his life by a planned double murder didn't seem to fill the bill.

The march was resumed at daybreak. Benson and his six troopers took the lead. They moved in utter silence; they seemed already to have separated themselves from Lee's men, who chatted freely as they herded the Indians along. Black Hawk strode at their head, a squaw following at his heels; he was an impressive figure in his blanket, and he alone held his head high. The rest of the Indians walked along, dogged and furtive, as if they felt themselves to be beaten men.

A little before noon Lee called Sergeant Sharp to him. "If I'm not mistaken, that trail on the right should appear within the next fifteen minutes," he said. "How far is it to the site of the massacre?"

"Benson was saying something about halting for dinner at one o'clock."

"That means we'll reach the site at one. We're working on borrowed time, Harry."

"Yes, sir."

"How will my men take my order?"

"They'll obey you, Lee."

"And Benson?"

The sergeant scratched his head. "I'd say that that depends on just what orders he's received from Scales," he answered.

Lee laughed. "I guess you're right there," he said. And he rode on, his eyes glued to the rising crests on the right, searching for any evidence of a break in that wall that enclosed Little Valley.

IT was twenty minutes after twelve, and Sergeant Sharp's remark about borrowed time was strictly correct, for they were approaching the middle of the sunken bowl, the site of the massacre. It was impossible to mistake that fact. And behind those rocks that rimmed the Valley Scales's men would be lying, ready to begin the massacre.

Forty minutes at most in which to find that exit. If he didn't find it, Lee wondered what would happen, how the Indians would be separated from the troopers, how the shooting would begin. Not least, just what sort of plan Scales and Benson had formed for removing him and young Dean from the scene. He hadn't any doubt but that such a plan had been concocted.

He called Dean to ride beside him. "We're obeying orders up to the last." Lee grinned. "I was to keep you by me, and give you a taste of plains life. I think the fun's due to start in thirty-five minutes."

Young Dean answered simply: "It's what I've been waiting for for four years."

Five more minutes went by. Half an hour now—and suddenly Lee saw a gap in the low crests to the right, and a tiny stream debouching into Little Valley, and knew that his map had been correct.

He rode along the line. "Halt! Halt those Indians!"

The troopers reined in, gesturing the Indians back. Benson and his men, in the van, halted too, and turned their horses around.

Lee pointed toward the defile. "Right wheel into line. Walk march!" he ordered. "And get those Indians along."

Benson came galloping back. "What's the meaning of this, lieutenant?" he shouted. "Our orders are to advance through Little Valley and hand over to Lieutenant Scales."

"Sergeant, I am giving the orders, and mine didn't tally with yours. Range your men alongside mine. We're taking this trail on the right. Well? Don't you intend to obey the order?"

"I'm damned if I do!" shouted Benson in a fury. "Them orders you've given don't tally with the orders I got from Lieutenant Scales."

Lee turned to Harry Sharp. "Sergeant, you'll take command of the squadron under me," he said. "Line up the man."

BENSON yelled to his six troopers, who drew together, facing Lee and his men. With their carbines out of their buckets, it looked for a moment as if Benson's men meant to open fire. But Lee and Sharp, with their troopers, herded the Indians into the defile, while Benson, beside himself with fury, shouted to his men, and led them back at a gallop toward the sink-hole.

The trail was hardly perceptible. For nearly a quarter of a mile it wound through a dense undergrowth of oak and jackpine. The Indians traveled in absolute silence, but the swish of the scrub against the flanks of the horses betrayed their movements. That was the only sound audible in the utter silence that had descended. High overhead, in the blue, a line of buzzards was strung out, ominously awaiting what their instinct told them might be the dénouement.

And then suddenly the scrub fell back, and on the left appeared the grassy bowl of Little Valley. The trail skirted the valley's edge, instead of turning sharply away. And, as the line of Indians debouched out of the scrub, a muderous fire broke out from among the rocks, four hundred yards away.

Instantly the Indians broke and ran for the brush-covered slopes a short distance ahead. Only three or four hundred yards, but barely more than half of them reached that goal. The rest dropped, or went crawling and slithering along, with the blood spurting from their wounds. At Lee's command, the troopers leaped from their mounts, and flung themselves on their faces. The horses, staggering under the storm of lead, ran screaming along the trail.

"Don't fire back!" Lee shouted, as his men began to answer the salvos of that invisible enemy. "Rush for the cover beyond, short rushes. Guard your rifles!"

At the first break in the storm, a small body of men rose and ran forward to where the trail began again, in the scrub beyond the valley. One dropped; the rest lay down, ran forward again as the attackers ceased firing once more, to reload. Again—Lee, Dean, and Sharp bringing

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up the rear. Two more men down. Lee stopped, picked up one of them, and slung him on his shoulders. He was last of the bunch now. He saw the foremost entering the cover of the scrub. A terrific volley. The man on Lee's back shuddered and slumped. Lee put him down. He knew he was carrying a dead man.

They were all in the scrub now, except the three who lay dead along the trail. They gathered together, cursing and shaking their fists. Four were wounded, but none seriously. Their comrades were bandaging their wounds. White-faced, Lee and Sharp looked into each other's faces.

"Silent, men!" ordered Lee.

HE looked about him. The trail was broader now. It ran toward a cleft in the hills, beyond which lay the reservation and Fort Lincoln. They were safe now from pursuit, unless they allowed themselves to be surprised. Sergeant Sharp, cursing softly, said: "It's murder. Scales can't get away with that!"

"He'll claim the Indians bolted, and that he was firing at them," answered Dean. He was leaning against a scrub pine, ghastly white. The troopers, shocked and unnerved, were squatting on the ground, scarcely speaking. The thing was beyond their experience. Lee looked at the wounds of those who had been hit.

"We can make it," he said. "We've got to make it. And I promise you I'll do my best to put ropes around the necks of those murderers."

Suddenly he became aware that the brush beside the trail was thick with Indians. They came gliding forward. But there was nothing hostile in their manner. His hands in front of him, palms outward, Black Hawk strode to Lee's side, grunting gutturally in Sioux. Lee, who understood only a little of the language, could only vaguely make out that the old chief was pledging friendship. But now a second Indian came forward, and Lee recognized the old man whom he had protected against Benson outside the Agency.

He listened to the gabbled speech, then spoke to Dean and Sharp. "We'd best get moving," he said. "If Scales was waiting at the sink-hole, he and Benson will be on their way to the fort, to get in their story first."

"I'm very sorry, Lieutenant," whispered Dean. "I can't . . . you see—"

He slumped to the ground. Lee saw the blood trickling from a slug-hole in his side, and the whole trouser leg was wet. Dean had been standing against the tree to conceal his wound.

But already Sharp was cutting away the cloth, and tying up the wound with a strip torn from a shirt. Lee stood looking down at the younger officer. "You'll be all right," he said. "We'll make it somehow—we've got to make it."

THEY caught three of the horses, suffering only from slight wounds, and placed Dean on one, and two of the wounded on the others. The dead they carried with them, to save them from desecration by the buzzards, slinging them between poles chopped from the scrub. And they took up their march again.

The trail wound amid the hills, continually rising, until, toward nightfall, it was possible to look down over the flats. They were now in the rocky foothills of the mountains, and there was certainly no danger that Benson and his men would be following them. Lee was wondering what sort of reception awaited them. Did Benson imagine he had wiped them out? And Scales must have been waiting at the sink-hole, for only Scales would have dared to give the order to fire upon them.

The men, their rage yielding to weariness, marched almost in silence through the night, with brief periods for rest. Lee walked most of the time holding the bridle of the horse on which Dean was strapped. The younger officer seemed to have lost a great quantity of blood, but the wound had ceased to bleed, and Dean was conscious, though still almost in a coma.

And Lee, walking beside him, kept en-

couraging him, and telling him that he'd pull through.

Once Dean smiled. "I've got to, Lee," he answered. "I haven't been trailing that snake all these years for nothing."

Lee said: "We've got him. He'll put up a bluff, but we've got him now."

On and on through the night under a brilliant moon. Over the foothills, and then the long, slow descent into the plains. The file of Indians, with Black Hawk in the lead, the troopers with their three wounded men on horseback, and the stretchers with the dead.

The sun rose hot into the heavens. They were on the plains now, and that little dot in the distance was the Agency, with Fort Lincoln hidden behind the ridge. They would pass by the Agency. They were about eight miles away when Lee called for the last halt.

"I don't know what surprise they're going to spring on us," he said, "but have your carbines ready. If they open fire first—not till then—shoot them down like the rats they are."

They rested, looked at the wounded, and started on the last lap about noon, under a blazing sun.

CHAPTER V

The Last Lap

TWO miles from the Agency they could see a stir at the fort. Scales's men were falling in; they had been sighted; and the meeting would take place close by the Agency. Already Scales's squadron was loping down the hill from the fort. There was time for them to intercept Lee and his party before they reached the Agency, but Lee felt that Scales would attempt his bluff in the presence of Luke Trumbull.

So the event proved. Scales drew up his men in line, waiting, while Lee truged forward, with Sergeant Sharp beside him; then the long file of Indians, with the troopers on their flanks; last the three horses with their wounded, and the stretcher-bearers with their pitiful burdens. Luke Trumbull had come

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out of the Agency, and was standing, talking to Scales.

It was all a clear picture, etched in the minutest detail against an agate sky. The little figures of men and horses, gradually growing larger, were so motionless. And Lee and his men were coming on and on . . . .

Scales and Sergeant Benson rode forward. Scales called: "Halt, Lieutenant Cameron! Throw down your arms, you and all your men, or we open fire! I arrest you for armed mutiny!"

Sergeant Sharp had already given his orders. The troopers moved their horses quickly, efficiently, taking up open order. Their carbines were in their hands; they were covering Scales's men. If ever those guns cut loose on both sides, there would be a holocaust of death.

Scales wouldn't dare play that hand. Lee halted his men fifteen yards away, rode forward a pace or two. "It won't work, Scales, and you don't dare open fire again—not in the presence of Mr. Trumbull. I'm calling your hand, Scales. Luke"—he addressed the Agent—"you're civil administrator here. Let him show that he has a case—any kind of a case, and we'll lay down our arms and surrender—which is the last thing he wants."

Luke Trumbull said: "I don't know the rights and wrongs of this, gentlemen, but of course we can't have bloodshed here. You're arresting Lieutenant Cameron for mutiny, Jack? Well, that's your right. But, even if it's irregular, I think we ought to arrange matters kind of peaceable. Suppose you say just how and why he's mutinied?"

SCALES laughed. "As you say, Mr. Trumbull, it's irregular. But, having a full-fledged mutiny on my hands about three hundred miles from the nearest U. S. military post, I'll explain the situation to you."

"Do."

"I sent Lieutenant Cameron to the border to take charge of those Indians, who had agreed to return and place themselves under United States protection. He was to hand them over to me in Little Valley, at the site of the massacre of ten months ago. That wasn't Lieutenant Cameron's intention. Instead, he took them along a trail through the foothills, in spite of Sergeant Benson's protests. You're a witness to that, sergeant?"

"I sure am," snarled Benson.

"Some distance along the trail, Lieutenant Cameron's men sneaked back and opened fire on us—"

"A lie!" shouted Sharp.

"Keep quiet; let him go on," said Lee.

"We returned the fire. I wasn't in any mood to let any of those mutineers get away. I thought they'd be hiding up in the badlands. But here they are, as bold as brass, and I'm placing them under arrest for a court-martial."

"That all?" asked Lee. "You'll be patient while I answer, Luke?"

Luke Trumbull shrugged his shoulders. "It's all irregular, of course," he said, "but if there's any way of stopping this mix-up from getting to Washington, I guess Jack won't object. It looks to me like a misunderstanding, and one of those things that ought to be settled between the two parties concerned. Jack, you won't object to Lee's stating his case?"

"I don't care what he states. He disobeyed orders, and that's mutiny. He opened fire on my men, and that means hanging. Of course, if he broke under the strain of bringing these Indians back—"

Lee could see Anna Trumbull and Judy on the porch of the Agency; his men and Scales's, carbines in their hands, eying each other. He said:

"What did you do with that army paychest that was lost in the Little Valley massacre, Lieutenant Scales?"

"Take him in, Lieutenant!" roared Sergeant Benson. "Don't listen to his lies!"

But a hush had fallen, and listening was the one thing that every man there meant to do. Lee went on:

"You and Sergeant Benson escaped the massacre, because it just happened that you were riding a good ways behind the column when the ambush was sprung.

I'm not insinuating anything against your courage. Maybe it was just your good luck. But you came out of hiding after it was all over, and discovered that Black Hawk hadn't attached much importance to that locked iron chest containing some eighty thousand dollars in greenbacks and gold."

"Oh?"

"So you cached it a little way along that same trail that I took. You brought a spade, to dig a hole in the mud beside a little stream. The marks of the spade are still there, and Indians don't use spades. The chest's still there, with the money, and—the stump of one of those cigars you smoke, Lieutenant Scales, with the charred band that is a dead give-away. *Flor de Santiago*, with a red-and-gold border. That's the kind you're still smoking. You must have ordered a whole lot of them."

"So?"

"Naturally, you didn't want your tracks uncovered. You had your own quarrel with me, and another with Lieutenant Dean, and you meant to shoot us down, as well as Black Hawk and his men, when we reached the massacre site in Little Valley. That would clean up the past. Only . . . only—"

One of the Indians had been sneaking forward. He was the old man whom Benson had assaulted outside the Agency. He had come forward so softly that his movements were imperceptible until he stood at Lee's side.

Twelve paces to the right, Lieutenant Scales sat on his horse; twelve to the left was Sergeant Benson. As the old Indian crept forward, Lee reached out his hand.

"Get back!" he said in Sioux.

The old man straightened himself, and suddenly bounded forward with a screech. Straight at Benson, and upon him almost before the sergeant realized it. The knife flashed, and Benson's gun roared simultaneously. The old Indian reeled and dropped, two Colt slugs in his brain.

But Benson was reeling too, reeling sidewise out of his saddle, slumping to

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the ground, with the blood spurting from a ghastly belly wound.

Lee sprang from his horse, ran to him, and raised him in his arms. He saw at once that the wound was mortal; the Indian's knife had almost eviscerated him. Others were gathering about the dying man; only Lieutenant Scales sat on his horse, like a mummified man, neither moving nor speaking.

BENSON was mumbling, but gradually his incoherent words gained strength. "Rainbag! I should have recognized him. Wasn't my fault his squaw . . . I ought to have killed him—"

His eyes, filled with hate and apprehension, came to a focus on Lee's.

"Sergeant, you're being transferred," said Lee. "Best hand in your papers."

"Damn Scales!" screamed Benson. "He led me into this. Said he'd got to square his gambling debts, and he'd split with me, after it was safe to dig up . . . dig up the chest—damn him! He wanted . . . to blot you out . . . and Dean—"

There was an explosive motion of Benson's chest, as if the weight of words was too much for his vocal cords. And suddenly Benson died.

It was contrary to all the medical rules. He should have passed out, with a few mumbled words. But he died with stark suddenness, giving no notice whatever. And the troopers from both sides, their enmity suspended, almost forgotten, stood by their horses, staring at one another over Benson's body.

A single voice cut through the silence. It was Scales's, blatant, contemptuous.

"Lieutenant Cameron," he called, "I'm out of this. There are too many liars in the army to suit a simple person like myself. I'm sending in my resignation, and handing over my duties to you. Take charge, lieutenant!"

Suddenly the horse he rode seemed to come to life. There was a whir of hoofs; it leaped past the startled troopers and Indians; in a moment Scales was riding beyond the Agency out into the hills. In complete silence the men watched him galloping into the distance, till horse and man were toy figures—and then until the ridge hid them from sight.

Lee said: "Line up, men. Right wheel—form threes! Forward—march! Sergeant Sharp, take over!"

And he stayed alone with Black Hawk and his men, and Trumbull, and the wounded.

Dean said in a weak voice: "You nailed him, Lee, and all my work was useless."

"Never mind, lad. We've seen the last of him," said Lee.

THERE was a sort of pause. There were some forty minutes of Lee's life that he was never to be able to reconstruct afterward. But men were carrying the wounded into the fort, and Luke Trumbull had gone, and Lee was with Judy. That was the moment when he regained possession of himself, after his lost forty minutes. That was the instant when reality came back.

Lee said: "I asked you a question, darling, and you didn't answer me."

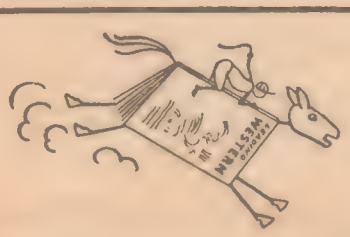
"What was that, Lee?"

"I said: 'As soon as I get my promotion?' "

"No, Lee!"

He held her at arms' length. "You mean that, Judy?"

"Why do we have to wait till you get your promotion?"



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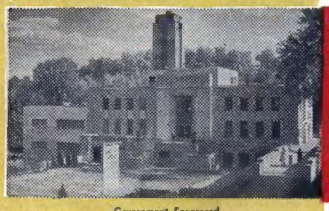

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